

7

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

**YOMI
HIRASAKA**

Illustration by
Kantoku





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♪ The Day I Had a Lover

♪ The Girl Friend's Reaction

♪ The Editor's Reaction

♪ The Stepbrother's Reaction

♪ The Guy Friend's Reaction

♪ The Tax Accountant's Reaction

♪ Things That Change, Things That Don't

♪ Level 4

♪ The Rival

♪ Encounters and Reunions

♪ The Template Temptation

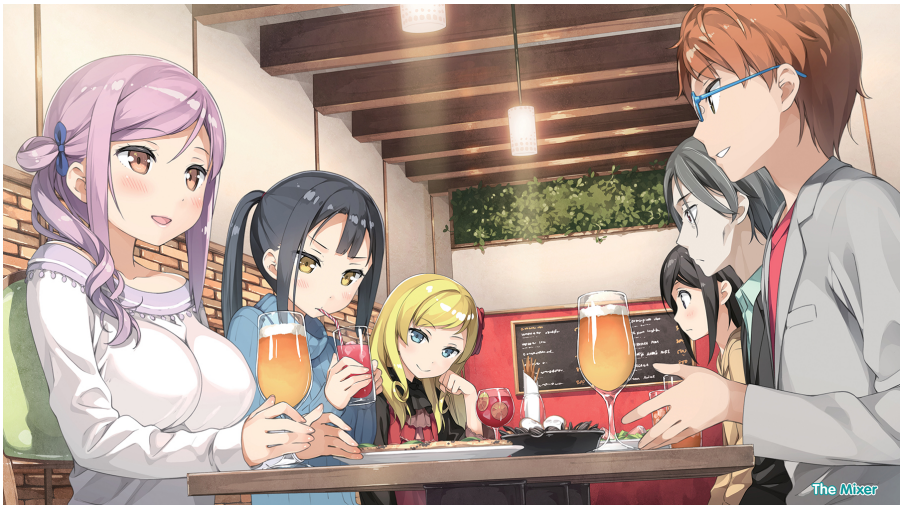
♪ The Last Cry in Hades

♪ Holy Night

♪ Bonus Track:
A Sisterly Fairy Tale







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Yomi Hirasaka

illustration by Kantoku



Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 7

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 7

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

A novelist seeking to devise the ultimate in little-sister characters.

CHIIHIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

A novelist prodigy 100 percent driven by her love for Itsuki.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

A manga artist.

MAKINA KAIZU

A veteran novelist.

SATOSHI GODO

Editor in chief of the GF Bunko publishing label.

KIRARA YAMAGATA

Nayuta's editor.

UI AIOI

Grand-prize winner of the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

MAKOTO YANAGASE

Runner-up in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

AOBA KASAMATSU

Runner-up in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

YOSHIIHIRO KISO

Honorable mention in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

SOMA MISAHA

Honorable mention in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

TADASHI KAMO

Special Judges' Selection winner in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

MUNENORI TARUI

Director of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

TSUTOMU OSHIMA

Producer of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

MASAHIKO HIRUGANO

Screenwriter of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

KAKERU YAMADA

Production assistant of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

TAKURO NORIKURA

Audio director of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

MASAKI ASAKURA

Casting manager of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

The Day I Had a Lover

On that day in late November during the recording session for the drama CD for the special edition of *All About My Little Sister*, Volume 6, when Itsuki Hashima heard Nayuta Kani was in the hospital, he immediately abandoned his duties and ran straight over.

Finding her at the clinic, and discovering why she had overworked herself to the point of physical breakdown, Itsuki finally caved. He had wanted to wait on this until he was sure he was a protagonist on equal footing with Nayuta, but he was out of time.

“I want to be with you. I want you to stay with me forever.”

Nayuta, of course, had been infatuated with Itsuki for far too long to turn him down. And with that, they were officially lovers.

They held each other tight, as if confirming each other’s feelings. After five, ten, twenty, thirty seconds with Nayuta’s haggard frame in his arms, Itsuki couldn’t help but think: *It’s okay if I keep doing this forever, right?*

...He wasn’t sure when to let go.

Not that he wanted to. He really *could* do it forever, to be frank. The sensation of her soft breasts through their clothing and the heat of her breath as she buried her face in his chest filled Itsuki with an indescribable happiness. But Nayuta was ill and still attached to an IV bag. They couldn’t be here all day.

Still, she showed no sign of letting go first.

Should he let go? Or shouldn’t he? As Itsuki agonized over the question:

“...Is it all right if I come in?”

“Whoa!”

Itsuki hurriedly pushed away from Nayuta at the sound of the gravelly, heavy voice behind him. At the doorway, looking into the room, was Satoshi Godo, the mafia-like editor in chief of the GF Bunko label. Next to him was Kirara Yamagata, Nayuta’s editor.

“I’m glad it’s nothing too serious, Kani.”

“...Thank you,” Nayuta sullenly replied, annoyed at having their

embrace interrupted.

Godo smirked a bit at this, then turned to Itsuki. “Well, I suppose we can all breathe a sigh of relief?”

“Y-yeah,” said Itsuki, blushing.

“All right, Hashima. You’ve got work to do.”

Itsuki’s eyebrows arched upward. The drama-CD recording was still in progress. It was about half an hour by car from the hospital back to the studio—he should be able to make it back before the session ended.

This time, at least, Itsuki had set his ideals aside enough to put Nayuta ahead of everything else. But that didn’t mean he had lost his resolve to become a hero on Nayuta’s level. If anything, acting on his feelings for her ahead of schedule just made him want to achieve the second part of his mission even sooner.

First, this drama CD. Shaking off any remaining desires to stay with Nayuta now that their feelings were out in the open, he resolved to devote everything he had to making this production a winner.

“...Okay, Kanikou, see you later. I gotta get back to work.”

Nayuta answered his farewell with a slightly forlorn look before giving him a soft smile. “All right, Itsuki. Good luck.”

The Girl Friend's Reaction

By the time Itsuki made it back to the studio, they had already completed their first pass through the script. Anime director Munenori Tarui, audio director Takuro Norikura, novel editor Kenjiro Toki, and manga artist Kaiko Mikuniyama were busy wrapping up the final check work on the results.

After giving a heartfelt apology for abandoning the recording for personal reasons, Itsuki went over the audio from the start. The rest of the voice cast and staff would have to wait in the meantime, of course. There was time for this—the schedule was pretty loose today, since they all planned to go out and party that night anyway—but he knew this was still putting a lot on everyone.

Banishing the pangs of guilt from his mind, he took a script in hand and focused on listening to the audio.

“...On page five, I'd like Kazuma's third line to be ‘And *that's* me,’ not ‘And *it's* me.’”

“...Shingo's second line, page twelve—I'm sorry, the error in the script was my bad. It should be ‘sorcery,’ not ‘magic.’”

“...Page fourteen, Ichika's second line—the way she said ‘I sure hope so’ was kind of on the optimistic side, but I'm picturing more of an anxious delivery.”

.....

.....

Little nuance and scripting issues like these, things only the original writer himself would pick up on, were weeded out one by one—a repetitive but efficiently performed process. A while later, about ninety minutes later than planned, the session was over.



“Mr. Hashima?”

As they headed for the site of their “before-party,” a worried-looking Kaiko turned to Itsuki.

“How was Nayu doing?”

He had informed the staff upon arriving that nothing was

seriously wrong with Nayuta, but that must not have been enough to fully assuage her concerns.

"They want to keep her in the hospital for three days, but she seemed to be doing well."

"Oh," Kaiko replied, visibly relieved. "...Ah, but we should tell Myaa, shouldn't we? If she's free tomorrow, I'd like to go with her to the hospital."

"Y-yeah?"

Miyako Shirakawa's sudden appearance in the conversation unnerved Itsuki. About two months ago, she had professed her love to him, and he had turned her down. One of the main reasons Nayuta overworked herself was so she could shine brighter than Miyako, lest her rival snatch Itsuki away from her. Miyako deserved to know he and Nayuta were officially a couple now.

When Miyako visited Nayuta tomorrow, he decided, he wanted to be there so they could give the news. Anxiously, he wondered how she would react.



The next day, when Kaiko and Miyako came to visit the hospital, Itsuki and Nayuta gave them the whole story.

Miyako just sat there for a little bit, her expression hovering between smiling and frowning, occasionally offering vague responses, like "Oh" and "Hmm" and "*Ohhhh*," but in time, the smile in her eyes and lips became something gentle and sincere.

"Well, um... Congrats, I guess. To both of you."

"Um... Thanks."

Blushing slightly, Itsuki avoided her gaze as if he'd just confessed to a crime. Nayuta, for her part, gave him a vague sort of expression, similar to Miyako's not long ago.

"Um... Sorry, Myaa."

Miyako smiled a bit. "I told you before, there's no need to apologize. Really, congratulations, Nayu."

Nayuta teared up a little. "Thank you, Myaa."

Miyako gave her another smile, then turned to Itsuki. "Itsuki, I want you to make Nayu happy, all right? If you make her cry or anything, I'm gonna break your collarbone."

"Um, okay..."

Itsuki's lips formed a terrified smile, while Miyako smiled back and said, "You gave me your word, okay?" There were tears in her eyes, too; the trio was brimming with emotion. Kaiko Mikuniyama, the additional person in the room, was a little lost at sea watching

them.

“...Uh... I—I don’t know much about the, um, subtleties of a moment like this...but if my hunch is correct... Did—did you have a thing for Mr. Hashima, Myaa?”

The other three looked back at her, and what they were thinking was written clearly on their faces: Now *you ask*?

“Oh,” Miyako said with a snicker, “I guess I never told you, huh? I told Itsuki I loved him a while ago, but he turned me down.”

“Oh...” Kaiko had a look of half surprise, half wonder at the offhand confession. She peered closely at Itsuki, stunned by this turn of events. “...Mr. Hashima, you’re more of a hot commodity than I thought...”



“.....As ashamed as I am to hear that, yes,” was the muted reply.

“By the way, Myaa, what is it that you like about Mr. Hashima?”

“Huh?!” Miyako exclaimed. “*That’s* where you wanna go with this conversation?!”

Kaiko’s question also seemed to inspire Nayuta. “Oh! Come to think of it, I never asked, either! Why did you fall in love with Itsuki anyway?”

“Nayu?! Not you, too!”

Miyako turned toward Itsuki, and he blushed when her slightly tearful eyes met his.

“D-don’t make her say it right in front of me, guys!”

“Awww,” Nayuta protested.

“He has a point,” Kaiko agreed. “But, Itsuki, aren’t you interested in hearing at all?”

Itsuki found himself seriously considering the subject.

“Well, I mean...”

Of course he was interested. What had kindled Miyako’s feelings for him? And when did it all start? It honestly baffled him. In order to grow as a person, and get some more ideas for the characters in his novels, he absolutely wanted to hear all the details.

He silently looked to her with anticipation.

“Nnngh...”

Miyako teared up even more—and in the next moment, anger blazed across her face.

“Arrrrgh! Will you people *quit* it?! I just had my heart broken! Itsuki brushed me off like two months ago, and today I learn he and Nayuta are a couple. That was kind of the death blow for me, y’know? Do you understand what I’m going through?! I need major emotional support right now! Just put me in the hospital myself for heartbreak, why don’t you?! Can you at least try to understand?!”

“...Um, all right.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Sorry, Myaa...”

Itsuki, Nayuta, and Kaiko all hung their heads in shame.

“Uggghhhhhh...” Miyako sighed deeply. “...I’m sorry. I sounded like a total idiot just now, didn’t I? Let’s just...pretend that never happened.”

The others silently nodded.

Miyako, once she got her breath back, gave them a tiny smile. “... But *anyway*, congratulations, Itsuki and Nayu. I gotta go home for today, but let’s hang once you’re out of the hospital, okay?”

“S-sure!”

“Get well soon, okay?” Miyako said as she turned toward the

door.

"Yeah, get well soon," Kaiko echoed as she followed her out.

Itsuki, the only one left, turned back toward Nayuta.

"...I was a little too mean to her." She sighed.

"Ahh, I bet she'll forgive you."

Nayuta nodded. "I know. Myaa's too nice and gentle not to do that... But we can't ask her to always be that way, either..."

"...No."

Love may have budded between them, but it had just withered for someone else. That was something Itsuki knew he couldn't afford to forget.

I need to get it together more. As a person, as a writer...as a man. His resolve from before was stronger than ever now.

"I better get going, too," he said.

"All right." Nayuta nodded, her cheeks reddening a little. "...Hey, Itsuki?"

"Mm?"

"Kiss me."

"...!" Itsuki, face fully red, stared at her for a few moments. "...All right."

Nayuta, just as red, closed her eyes and puckered her lips. Itsuki lightly placed his hands on both of her shoulders and suddenly noticed that each beat of his heart felt stronger than usual. He leaned in toward Nayuta.

This would be the first kiss for both of them, but fortunately there were no tooth-on-tooth incidents or other disasters as their lips met. It lasted less than a second, really just long enough for them to sense the contact between them, but their faces still felt like they were on fire.

"Nya-ha... Nya-ha-ha... Nyaaaaah..."

Opening her eyes, she smiled a dreamy, melty smile. Itsuki averted his eyes, unable to look at her face. "Okay, uh, see ya!" he blurted out as he all but fled the room.



The Editor's Reaction

“...I call for the oldest tortoise in the land, the stoutest of shields. The black of twilight, never swallowed by any raging waters. The great reptile of miracles, the all-encompassing master of illusion. Heed my summons and make your power manifest... Genbu!”

With his Power Words, the large pentacle Kiyooki drew upon the land lit up in a blinding flash, and the form of a naked woman appeared from its center—she was almost inhumanly beautiful, gifted with voluminous breasts.

“...I, Genbu, one of the Four Holy Sisters, have heeded the call of my big brother. I will forever be at your command.”

With that detached introduction, the girl—Genbu—heaved her soft, malleable twin peaks and bowed deeply.

Kiyooki coolly nodded, a smile forming at the corners of his lips. “Yes. Thank you very much.”

Behind him, a loud, brash voice rang out. “Congratulations, my elder brother.”

“Wow, big bro! You finally got all four of us together!”

“Well done, sir!”

“Yeah,” replied Kiyooki, smiling as he turned around.

There, he saw three similarly naked young women, their forms all closely resembling Genbu. Seiryu, the girl with deep blue eyes and a calm smile; Suzaku, a slightly younger-looking girl with a bit of volume in her bangs; and Byakko, a silver-haired girl whose eyes revealed a stronger-willed interior. Together with the girl just summoned from the pentacle, these four beauties were the ultimate siblings of legend—the Four Holy Sisters.

Over a thousand years ago, famed spiritualist Abe no Seimei—the man fabled in myth as the luckiest big brother to ever exist in history—banded these sisters together to live out the pinnacle of sibling life. Ten years ago, Seimei's distant descendant Kiyooki Tsuchimikado happened across a tome containing a forbidden family secret—the spells required to summon the Four Holy Sisters. He had devoted himself heart and soul to deciphering this ancient grimoire, and now he had finally succeeded in bringing this sacred quartet back to the world.

“Heh-heh...”

Kiyoaki couldn't help but smile to himself. The thought of all the days, all the years of big-brother bliss awaiting him filled his heart with untamed joy.

"Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh... Haaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

The four legendary sisters looked on longingly as his laughter echoed into the sky.

...This prologue was followed by several dozen pages of the five of them flirting, engaging in light foreplay, etc.

"Um... Well... Hmm. I'm finished reading."

The ordeal complete, Kenjiro tossed the manuscript on the low *kotatsu* table with an inscrutable look on his face.

This was yet another spec proposal for a new novel series from Itsuki Hashima—a "slice-of-life" plot, if you had to assign it a genre. There were a few elements of romance and fighting, too, but those were mere accents to the main focus of depicting Kiyoaki and his swingin' new family/harem life.

"...What do you think?" Itsuki asked from the other side of the table, a little tense.

On the day he reported to Miyako that he and Nayuta were now a couple, he came back home and swore to himself that he had to grow—as a person and as an author. He then dove straight into writing, spending the next two days whipping up this new sample piece with hardly a break for sleeping. Personally, he thought he was really onto something with this one, but only his editor could give the final judgment.

"Well, um..." Toki paused a moment to think. "...In a word, it was...fun."

"...!!"

A wave of relief spread over Itsuki's face.

"The four heroines are all cute," Toki continued. "A little nasty, too. And the dialogue between them and the protagonist feels really alive. It was a neat read."

"Right, right..."

"Slice-of-life stories like these have a tendency to be too middle-of-the-road and unengaging, but you're doing a good job at adjusting the tempo throughout while still keeping it laid-back and accessible. That balance isn't something you can just sit down and teach yourself, you know. I feel like I'm experiencing a new side of Itsuki Hashima, the author."

"Oh... Wow..."

Itsuki didn't even notice the smile spreading across his face at this unprecedented torrent of positive feedback from his editor.

"...But."

“B-but?”

“...These four heroines... They kind of all have the same character traits, don't they?”

Itsuki answered with a dissatisfied lift of his eyebrows. “Well...I mean, they're gonna *have* to be a little similar, given that they all love their big brother a whole lot and stuff...”

“Sure, sure. But I'm talking more on, like, a fundamental level. It kinda feels like you've taken the personality of a single person and divvied it out to four different characters.”

Toki paused, searching for the words, before deciding to just be honest.

“...These heroines... They're all Kani, aren't they?”

“What...?!”

Itsuki's eyes widened. He grabbed at the manuscript on the table, carefully reading it over. Big tits... Silver hair... Blue eyes... Teased hair... Expressionless, mysterious, innocent, petite, wispy, pale, naked...

Yes, those are all traits of Nayuta, aren't they?

“No... It can't be... I never noticed...”

“Plus, the sisters inexplicably do that “nyaaa” thing at the main hero every now and then. Sound familiar?”

“Gahh?! ”

His editor's observation knocked Itsuki for a loop.

“...And it's perfectly fine to model your characters after real people, of course...but you *really* didn't notice?”

“Nnnhh...”

Itsuki looked down, face red, as Toki rolled his eyes at him. He had created a heroine—*four* heroines, actually—based off someone Toki knew, then banged out several dozen pages depicting his hero fooling around with them. It's a writer's job to describe what he's picturing in his mind, yes, but this was a little *too* shameful. It wasn't even purposeful. He was completely oblivious.

“Arrrgghh...! I can't believe how embarrassing this is... Ugghhhhhh...”

Toki looked down warmly as Itsuki writhed around on the floor, flailing in shame.

“Hey, I know how it feels when you kick off a relationship. Everything's still all lovely-dovey between you guys. There's nothing to be *that* ashamed of.”

“Gaahhhh!! ”

The light taunting from Toki made Itsuki roll around even more violently. Thanks to Satoshi Godo and Kirara Yamagata, who had

witnessed the event firsthand, the news had already spread far and wide across the editorial department.

“Yeah, congrats on finding yourself someone so cute.” Toki grinned.

“Nooo... ‘Lovey-dovey’?! Was getting the first girlfriend in my life enough to make me *this* insufferable?! Is it so bad it’s unconsciously leaking into my writing?! *Aaagggghhhhh!!* This whole time, I thought I was pursuing the unattainably, unrealistically perfect little sister, but now my *real* girlfriend’s showing up in it! *Goddammit!* I *hate* people with an actual love life! Oh wait, that’s *me* now! I hate myself! I *haaaaaaaate* myself!!”

Toki politely waited for his suffering author to settle down and breathe before he chose to speak again.

“By the way, Itsuki...”

“Guhhh?” Itsuki replied, muffled by the floor.

“What are you gonna do with this sample? Because personally, I think that if we could deal with this identical-character issue, I wouldn’t mind if we officially went with this as a new series.”

“.....”

Itsuki silently sat up...

“Hmph!”

...and neatly tore the manuscript on the table in half, shoving it into his wastebasket.

“.....This new series proposal never existed. Let’s go with that, please.”

Toki grinned at this heartfelt request. *Now that he’s got a girl*, he thought, *it’d be nice if he could try something based on his own experiences instead of obsessing over little-sister tropes.*

But Toki still knew this obsession was the engine that fired the rest of author Itsuki Hashima’s soul. So he didn’t try to force him in a new direction. Not as long as things were going (relatively) well.

This was Toki’s fifth year as Itsuki’s editor. He had worked part-time at GF Bunko’s editorial department for two years while attending night classes before the editor in chief recommended him for a permanent job at Gift Publishing, and Itsuki was the first novelist he was assigned. They were both new to their respective positions, which led to some pretty heated arguments on regular occasions, but now Itsuki’s work was getting adapted into anime. He’d always had good instincts, but compared to the unrefined voice of his early days, his writing chops were miles better. He still tended to fly off to his own little world way too often, but he had also calmed down enough that he could see those tendencies for what they were.

At this point, Itsuki no longer needed an editor controlling him from start to finish. To an editor, seeing an assigned writer mature

into a proven talent was a joyous occasion—and Toki had gotten his first taste of that joy with Itsuki Hashima. He made a point not to mention that to Itsuki himself, though. He didn't need that kind of encouragement.

"All right... Any more work-related things to discuss?"

"Hang on," Itsuki said as Toki stood up. "I wanted to hammer out some things for the plot of the new *Sisterly Combat* volume."

"Ooh, sorry, but I gotta meet with a new writer at five. Can that wait till tomorrow?"

Itsuki nodded. "Sure, no problem. A new guy, huh?"

"Um, Yoshihiro Kiso. He placed in the 15th New Writers Contest."

"Kiso? Which one was he again?"

Itsuki was in attendance for the awards ceremony earlier in November, so he must've seen him at least once, but his memory was failing him.

"The older dude. In his sixties. He wrote *Sengoku Kenpuden*."

"Ohhh, yeah..."

Yoshihiro Kiso was by far the oldest winner in the New Writers Contest and by far the oldest writer in the entire GF Bunko stable. He was an energetic man, though, one who looked right at home in his traditional Japanese *yukata*.

"Wow, you're managing that guy, huh?"

"...Yeah," Toki said, voice a little heavy. It wouldn't be the first time he edited for someone older than him, but Kiso was literally over twice his age, so he still wasn't sure how to work with him. He knew the casual, frank approach he took with Itsuki probably wouldn't cut it, at least.

"Are you editing any of the other new guys?"

"Makoto Yanagase, too. *The Goddess Must Be Punished!*"

"Ooh, the spanking dude?"

"Yeahhh..."

His work was completely off the wall, but Yanagase himself was the classic levelheaded salaryman, polite and well versed in common sense. He was easy to strike up a conversation with, but when that conversation turned to fetish spanking (as it often did with him), he would suddenly erupt into so much passion that his mind would completely shut itself off to Toki's advice. They were in the midst of revising his prize-winning manuscript for publication, but Yanagase's worryingly exacting standards were making progress inexorably slow.

"...Sounds like a lot of work," Itsuki said with a touch of sympathy.

Toki snickered. "Yeah, I just keep on drawing the problem-child writers..."

"You got nobody to blame but yourself for that. That's the kind of

writer you get attracted to.”

At GF Bunko, editors generally had the right to pick their writer assignments. In the case of Kiso and Yanagase, Toki had read both their novels and thought, “This is someone I’d like to work with,” and so he volunteered for the jobs.

“You’re right. But really, though, sometimes you have totally normal, sensible folks who write utterly insane nonsense, and sometimes you have these out-of-their-mind eccentrics who write the most ordinary stories. That happens most of the time, actually, that kind of mismatch. You never know who you’ll be working with until you start.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

It made sense to Itsuki. A few examples floated into his mind—the pure-romance novelist who had a habit of frequenting Tokyo’s sex shops; the Lolita heroines of a man who preferred older women; the grotesque sex-horror novels of a loving husband in a nuclear family.

“You aren’t including me among the ‘problem children,’ are you?”

Toki squinted his eyes. “You’re their leader.”

“...What?”

Itsuki scowled at him. The possibility had never even crossed his mind.

BOOK PROPOSAL **MY FAMILY'S FOUR HOLY SISTERS** (tent.)

CONCEPT

Itsuki Hashima's first laid-back slice-of-life comedy!

SYNOPSIS

In a modern-day Japan with an ever-so-slightly different history from ours, high school student Kiyoaki Tsuchimikado—descendant of an ancient line of mystics—uses an old tome found in his family archives to summon four little sisters. These new additions to the family quickly turn his everyday life into a circus!

CHARACTERS

[Kiyoaki Tsuchimikado]

A seventeen-year-old high schooler who's descended from the legendary mystic Abe no Seimei. His latent talents lead many to hail him as the second coming of Seimei, and he's dreamed from a young age of sharing a happy life with the mythical sisters.

[Seiryu]

A blue-eyed girl who's always smiling. Loves Kiyoaki and quickly sheds her clothes for him.

[Suzaku]

A small, innocent girl with a strand of hair that always sticks up. Loves Kiyoaki and quickly sheds her clothes for him.

[Byakko]

A pushy but sweet girl with silver hair and a wispy body. Loves Kiyoaki and quickly sheds her clothes for him.

[Genbu]

A well-endowed, expressionless, hard-to-grasp girl. Loves Kiyoaki and quickly sheds her clothes for him.

[Michiru Ashiya]

A young female mystic who sees Kiyoaki as a rival. Frequently challenges him to duels but also dreams of bearing his children someday and quickly sheds her clothes for him.

The Stepbrother's Reaction

Do you really need to tell your younger brother about your new lover? That depends on the brotherly relationship you have, of course. But if that brother stops by your place regularly, heroically cooking and cleaning for you, and even knows your lover personally, it'd be hard to think about *not* relaying the news.

So Itsuki wasted no time doing so on the night he revealed his new project to his editor and promptly tore it up in his face. He and Chihiro were eating at the table like always when he tried to bring it up as casually as possible, almost as if he were talking about someone else—like, *Hey, I got a girlfriend, no biggie.*

“Oh, speaking of which, Kanikou and I are officially a thing now.”

“Brff...ffphh...!! Koff, koff, koff...!”

Chihiro's reaction was nothing short of dramatic. Bits from the egg-and-rice omelet he was eating shot into the air and down his esophagus, choking him. The ketchup that dribbled down his chin looked like blood from a critical hit.

“Y-you okay?!” Itsuki asked, alarmed.

“Y-yeah, I, *bngh*, sorry, I need a napkin—”

Chihiro stood up, intending to grab a towel to clean up, the concern still clear on his face...

“Hyah!”

...and then tripped over his own feet and fell down.

“Chihiro?!”

There was no time for Chihiro to even stick his arms out. He dove to the floor headfirst, lying there inert.

“Um... You all right...?”

“I-I'm fine,” he weakly replied to his gravely concerned brother. “Nngh...” He got back up to his feet, groaning the whole way. The tip of his nose was red from the impact, and his eyes were tearing up. Without another word, he walked to the kitchen, wetting a washcloth and wiping down the table with it as Itsuki awkwardly watched.

“Phew...”

When the cleaning was done, Chihiro brought the washcloth back

to the kitchen, sat down at the *kotatsu* once more, and softly smiled at Itsuki.

“So what were we talking about, big bro?”

“After all that, you’re trying your best to pretend nothing happened...? You’re a resilient dude, you know that? Your nose is still red, by the way.”

Chihiro frowned, face reddening at Itsuki’s honest admiration.

“Nghh...”

“But, um... I wasn’t expecting it to be *that* much of a surprise. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Itsuki... But is that really true? Um... You’re together with Kani now?”

“Yep. It’s true.”

“Oh,” Chihiro softly replied. Itsuki nodded back, totally failing to see what the issue was. Why was he so clearly responding negatively to this?

“...Are you against it, Chihiro?”

“.....Not *against* it, no. That’s your choice to make, after all...”

“...Do you hate Kanikou or something?”

“No! I don’t hate her at all! ...Um. Maybe we don’t *totally* get along all the time, but...”

This wishy-washy reaction bewildered Itsuki even more. “...So what’s the problem?” he asked, coming on a tad more strongly.

Chihiro sat there in silence for a moment.

“.....I mean,” he finally said, voice near a whisper, “if you get a girlfriend, then when I come over here and do stuff... I’m gonna get in the way, aren’t I?”

Itsuki stared at him, not expecting this.

“Huh? Why would that be the case?”

“Like... If Kani’s your girlfriend, and she starts coming here even more often than now... Then, um, it could escalate from there, and if —if you start *living* together or whatever, then won’t I get in the way? Of...you know, making out and stuff...?”

“Making out?” Itsuki’s cheeks turned a shade of crimson. But the problem wasn’t with Nayuta herself, apparently. Chihiro was just concerned about Itsuki having a lover at all. The thought made him sigh.

“You *know* you’d never be in the way.”

“...Really?”

Itsuki looked into the eyes of his anxious little bro. “In fact, if you *don’t* keep on coming over like always, that’s really gonna suck.”

“Huh?”

“...Not that I’m proud of it, but I’m incapable of keeping myself alive.”

“Oh...um...maybe, yeah...”

“So... I mean, just imagine the two of us living together. We’d have to eat convenience-store food three meals a day, this place would get dirty twice as fast, and we’d be living in filth and miasma in the blink of an eye!”

“You sound almost proud of that, and I’m not sure you should be,” a concerned-looking Chihiro interrupted. “But...it’s okay for me to keep coming here like usual, then?”

“Hell, I wouldn’t mind if you came *more* often... But only if you’re okay with it.”

Relief finally began to spread across Chihiro’s face. “Well, if you say so, I’ll be glad to keep cooking for you.”

There was something about this reaction that struck Itsuki as genuinely happy. He wondered for a moment why a boy would want to get so involved with their elder brother’s business, but he declined to say anything about it.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What does Haruto like besides maids?



Well, I like the classic “cooking woman” look, big apron and everything. I always kinda wish heroines like that had more of an audience. Also, it’s well-trod territory, but I like girls in those body-hugging *qipao* dresses, or nurse uniforms, or...

QUESTION

Haruto Fuwa! Give me a little sister.



If you don’t mind *my* little sister, you can come take her anytime.

QUESTION

How long does Miyako intend to keep wearing clothes?

What the hell does *that* mean?!



The Guy Friend's Reaction

The next afternoon after Itsuki revealed his new relationship to Chihiro, he received a text from Nayuta that she had been discharged from the hospital. He offered to come help her out, but she declined, explaining her father was taking care of that. She would then be moving out of the suite at the business hotel she had been living in since late March of this year on the pretext of “focusing on her novels” and spend some time at the family home in Kanagawa prefecture.

Itsuki figured this would happen. He knew Nayuta already took the hour-long trip home a few times a week, but here was this girl living in a hotel, barely even eating, so unable to take care of herself that she wound up hospitalized. No sane parent would want to send their child right back into that same environment.

Your apartment is so far away. I'm lonely [ᄇᄇᄇ]

...So cute.

Itsuki reflexively typed “Me too” into the phone but rewrote it before sending. He was a little too bashful for that.

You came over to my place all the time even before you were in that hotel. It's not that far!

Nayuta replied almost instantly.

You're right [/ ≥ ㄣ ≤]

But now I can stay over all I want without worrying about making the last train. Maybe it's better if I don't live within walking distance after all ㄱ [^ ω ^ ㄱ]

The term “stay over” made Itsuki's face warm up.

She had stayed over before, of course, but he remained stoic on those occasions, concentrating wholly on his work or forcing himself to go to sleep instead of dealing with her. Now, though, they were a

couple. There was no reason to keep his distance. They could kiss, they could hug, they could touch each other, they could sleep under the same covers. They could even go beyond that if they wanted... probably.

The next time Nayuta stays at my place...what's gonna happen to me?

A jumble of anxieties and expectations accelerated his heartbeat. He had trouble thinking straight as his thoughts disappeared into a pink-tinged fog. He wanted to see Nayuta soon. He wanted to ask when she'd be over next. He knew he had a lot to do—writing for *All About My Little Sister* and *Sisterly Combat*, brainstorming for new series—but his mind was too full of Nayuta to care.

So it takes a girlfriend to feel this kind of...euphoria?

But as Itsuki was letting the happiness wash over him, the sound of the doorbell ringing dragged him back to reality. A little ashamed of his rose-tinted mind, he quickly stood up and headed for the door.

"...Hey...Itsuki..."

Behind it was Haruto Fuwa with a thousand-yard stare.



Haruto had learned of Itsuki and Nayuta's relationship while chatting over the phone earlier with Kawabe, his editor. The topic had come up after they finished their novel-related discussions, when Kawabe simply commented, "Hey, did you know Kani and Hashima started dating?"

"You're joking, right?" Haruto replied, unable to parse the concept at first, but it was apparently true.

"Yeah, the boss and Yamagata saw it firsthand. It was exactly like the climax of some romantic drama. It's funny to think that stuff really happens, huh?"

"...Oh. Wow... Really...?"

...When the call ended, Haruto immediately ran out of his family's house in Chiba and headed for Itsuki's apartment.



Now he and Itsuki were seated facing each other at the *kotatsu* table. Haruto, fresh from catching his breath with some iced tea from the fridge, stared at his companion wordlessly. Itsuki avoided his gaze, a little sheepish.

"....."

"....."

“.....”

“.....What?! Did you want to say something?!”

It was Itsuki who gave in to the silence first.

Haruto answered with an emotionless question: “Is it true that you’re a thing with Nayu now?”

“Ah...yeah,” Itsuki replied, a tad daunted at the excessively direct question.

“Oh,” Haruto whispered back before once again falling into silence, examining Itsuki’s face.

“Ngh...”

...I’m not really anything yet, but when I’m a protagonist on an even level with Kanikou...then I’m gonna tell her that I love her. And I know it’s not fair to her, but I need her to wait until then.

Haruto remembered what Itsuki had told him a while ago, back when Haruto was pushing him to quit screwing around and accept Nayuta as his girlfriend. And when Haruto had replied, “So be it,” he sincerely meant it.

At the time, the conversation felt like something passionate and profound, a private moment shared between two rivals striving to fulfill the same ambition. But hardly a breath later, Itsuki dove right in. If the roles were reversed here, Itsuki would probably be ranting about what the hell Haruto was doing.

“...Huh.” Haruto let out a light sigh, then fell back into staring at Itsuki.

“.....Ughhhhh, all *right* already!” Itsuki raised his voice. “If you’ve got something to complain about, just say it! Please!”

“Complain?” Haruto listlessly replied. “No, no complaints, really. Just...like...**I’m thinking about that one Hermann Hesse story, and I know how Emil felt when he said ‘Now I see the kind of man you are.’**”

“That’s totally dissing me, isn’t it?!”

It was, perhaps, one of the most damning things one friend could say to another. It simply wasn’t worth being happy for, or angry at, their companion—there was no value in applying emotion to their relationship at all.

“Um... You really mean that...? You’re that upset...? ‘Cuz, like, I’d appreciate it if you’d be all like, ‘What the hell are you doing,’ but... I mean, I don’t think I’m totally the bad guy here or anything...” Itsuki shrugged, crestfallen at the shock.

Haruto gave him another cold stare, and then:

“.....*Pfft!*”

He blurted out a chuckle.

“Uh?”

Itsuki stared, wide-eyed and confused, as Haruto cracked a smile. “Quit freaking out, Itsuki. There’s no need to feel *that* obliged to me. You finally got a girlfriend you really like. Be happy for that!”

“Um...okay...”

Itsuki frowned as it finally dawned on him that he was being mocked. But he still felt he owed Haruto something.

“...I mean,” Haruto continued, “you haven’t given up on being as big an author as Nayu, right? Or did you get your anime adaptation, and that’s a good enough finish line for you?”

“Oh, of course not!” Itsuki snapped back. “This anime is just a checkpoint on the highway! And yeah, maybe I got my anime first, but I still have a while to go before I’m equals with Kanikou!”

Haruto grinned at the boundlessly honest declaration. “Then I’ve got no complaints. So be happy! Nayu deserves that.”

“Y-yeah...”

Itsuki blushed a little as he nodded, still a bit anxious.

“...Haruto, are you sure you aren’t angry or frustrated with me?”

Haruto replied with his classic breezy smile. “Nope. Not at all.”

“...Oh. Well, good.” Itsuki sighed. “So we’re good like we were?”

“Yeah.”

Itsuki grinned, pure happiness on his face. “So you’re cool even if **I lose my virginity before you**, right? We can keep on drinking and playing games together like always?”

“.....Um, er, mmhmm.”

Haruto’s breezy smile froze as he just barely remembered to nod.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Fuwa seems to buy a lot of books and games.
How does he store them?



If I'm not doing anything with them anymore, I put them in cardboard boxes or plastic bins. For now, at least, things are pretty organized...but it doesn't quite all fit in my room anymore, so my parents and my sister are yelling at me to do something about it. I doubt I can get away with this much longer, so I'm thinking about renting some storage space.

Really? Because if I know I'm done with a book, into the recycling it goes! If I get a sudden urge to read it again, I can always re-buy it.



That's such a waste, Itsuki! If you don't want a book, I'll take it!



Oh, uh... Oh.



The Tax Accountant's Reaction

On a late Sunday in November, the afternoon of the day Nayuta was discharged, Chihiro was relaxing in the bath at Ono Tax Accounting's office quarters, fresh off her part-time job handling paperwork and keeping the place clean.

Despite the office's location in a mixed-use building, this was a pretty swanky bathroom, featuring a special-order cypress-wood tub and everything. Chihiro looked forward to soaking in it on a weekly basis.

"Ahhh..."

"What's wrong? You look down."

Ashley Ono, the blonde-haired lady who was Chihiro's boss and Itsuki's tax accountant, lobbed the question from the other side of the bath she was sharing with Chihiro.

"Oh... Well, my brother's actually gotten into a relationship with a girl."

"...Hmm..."

The revelation seemed to disturb Ashley somewhat. She narrowed her eyes.

"You know the girl," Chihiro continued, failing to notice. "It's Nayuta Kani, the writer. And Itsuki says I can keep on coming to his place like usual, but I'm still kind of nervous about all this..."

"Oh my... Itsuki's with *her*, is he...?"

Hearing the name filled Ashley's eyes with even more concern. Chihiro couldn't help but wonder.

"Um, is something bad about that?"

"...It's made me lose hope in him, that's for sure."

"Huh?!" Chihiro tensed up. "Wh-what do you mean?"

Ashley's eyes darted between her chest and Chihiro's, a peeved look on her face. "That girl... She's pretty well-endowed, isn't she?"

"....."

Chihiro followed Ashley's eyes, checking the similarity between their chest sizes, then recalled Nayuta's more bountiful proportions.

"...She is. They're...uh, pretty big."

"...You know, I *hate* big-breasted women."

Chihiro leaned back a bit at this rather straight evaluation. "...Is

there a reason for that?"

"You know why. There's only one reason why a girl would hate big boobs."

"Uhh..."

Chihiro didn't.

"...One of them took my guy."

"Your... She took your guy?!" Chihiro blushed.

Ashley looked at her ruefully. "It actually happened twice."

"Twice?!"

"...The first time was my second year in high school... The second when I was a junior in college... And both of them had big boobs... And both guys were all 'Oh, no, they're fine small; you just keep on being you'... I never really believed that, so I studied up on assorted techniques to please them, no matter how small I was... But it was pointless. All men care about is size! And you know, I'm so small, my BF's friends even accused him of dating someone underage! One time, we went to this love hotel for a little playtime, and they called the police on us! But so what?! What's so bad about that?!"

"W-wow, sounds rough..."

The way Ashley bared her soul out of nowhere made Chihiro blush so hard, she thought her head would catch on fire.

"But... But I don't think my brother chose Kani because of her—her boobs or anything..."

"You really think so? Are you absolutely certain Itsuki pays no attention to boobs at all?"

"Well, I..." Chihiro fell silent for a moment. But then she remembered Miyako Shirakawa, a woman who offered her love to Itsuki and was summarily refused. As far as Chihiro could tell, she was just as cute and charming as Nayuta. And what was the deciding difference between them? That's right. Their chests.

"...No, maybe he *does* like them bigger..."

"No such thing as a man who doesn't, let me tell you," Ashley groaned.

"...Yeah..."

Ashley sighed, anger giving way to sadness. "...Ugh, I wish I had a man..."

Chihiro couldn't help but chuckle a bit at how easily the accountant confessed to the desire of her id.

"You really want one...?"

"I sure do," she replied, completely unashamed. "Next week is December, and thinking about how I'll be alone on Christmas gets me so depressed... I just wish the world could end before then..."

"Ha-ha..."

When they had just met, Ashley struck Chihiro as someone who

looked young, but was as clever as she was aloof from the world. That image was firmly a thing of the past now. She was a hard worker, for sure, but to Chihiro, she was less a grown woman and more a lazy big sister who'd fall to pieces if you didn't watch over her.

"...I'm glad *you're* a girl, Chihiro," Ashley said out of nowhere, voice deep and serious.

Chihiro raised an eyebrow. "Huh? Why is that?"

"Because if you were a man, I might've found myself violating the laws of Tokyo..."

"Huh...?"

Ashley smiled mischievously at the suddenly concerned-looking Chihiro. "Hee-hee! Just kidding."

"Oh, uh...yeah... Ha-ha-ha..."

It wasn't funny to Chihiro. *I hope this lady finds someone soon...*

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Tell me what type and color of panties
Ashley likes to wear.



Baby-doll lingerie. I like them in red.

QUESTION

Tell me what kind of man Ashley likes!



I'm really not that picky. As long as he makes at least eight million yen a year, is good at cooking, can do chores around the house, is kind and attentive, keeps himself clean, looks hot, is in his twenties, won't cheat on me, will love me with all his heart, and is willing to play the submissive role in our relationship, anybody is fine. Also, if he's taller than me, I'm set.

shudder The strangest chill
just ran down my spine...



Things That Change, Things That Don't

Three days after Nayuta's discharge, she had gathered with Itsuki, Haruto, Miyako, and Chihiro at Itsuki's apartment to celebrate her recovery.

The *kotatsu* table was filled with Chihiro's cooking. The three adults sat around it enjoying beer, while Nayuta opted for a Calpico and Chihiro had his usual oolong tea. On the menu tonight was fried chicken, hamburg steak, spaghetti with mushrooms, and other classic, easy-on-the-palate foods Nayuta enjoyed. The beer was Vedett Extra Blond, a light, refreshing ale that went great with greasier foods. Chihiro was seated on the side facing the kitchen with Haruto facing him window-side. Miyako sat by the TV, and the spot in front of the bed was taken by Itsuki and Nayuta.

"Um, well, first, I'm sorry to make all of you worry about me," Nayuta bashfully began. "I'm all better, though, as you can see."

She was right. The color had returned to her face, and the slightly haggard look from before her hospitalization was gone.

Miyako, Haruto, and Chihiro all greeted her in unison—"Congrats on your discharge!" "Congratulations!" "Congrats!"

"Thank you," Nayuta replied, bowing slightly as her cheeks reddened a bit. "Now, I also have an announcement for everybody. Itsuki and I have officially agreed to start a new relationship!"

She took Itsuki by the arm, joyfully fidgeting in embarrassment.

"Uh, yeah, we know," laughed Miyako as she clapped her hands. Haruto and Chihiro joined her—the former out of courtesy, the latter with a slightly pained look on his face.

"Weh-heh-heh... Deh-heh-heh-heh..."

The somewhat tepid reaction was not enough to dampen Nayuta's spirits. She smiled broadly at them. Itsuki, meanwhile, turned his head away from her a bit, blushing—but at least now he wasn't swatting Nayuta's arm away or yelling at her to let go.

Miyako looked at them, a bit forlorn. Haruto was the first to pick up on her emotions, and it saddened him as well. "Okay, well, let's have a toast!" he said, trying to sound chipper.

"Good idea!" agreed Miyako.

"Okay, Kanikou, you're the star of the evening, so you do the

honors.”

“All right!”

Nayuta took her arm away from Itsuki and raised her glass full of Calpico. The others followed the gesture.

“Well, here’s to our marriage!”

“Wh-who said we were getting married?! We’re not, okay?! Not yet!” Itsuki interrupted, cheeks red. “Uh, here’s to Kanikou getting discharged! Cheers!”

“Nyaaaaa...”

Nayuta gleefully clinked glasses with Itsuki, the other three chuckling as they joined in.



“Kahhh! I can’t believe how good your cooking is, Chihiro!”

Nayuta was now busy gleefully chomping her way through it all.

“Thank you very much,” an appreciative Chihiro replied. “But are you sure you can have all this so soon? I wanted the menu to have all your favorite stuff, but...”

None of the dishes on the table were exactly great for one’s digestion, which had Chihiro somewhat concerned.

“Oh, it’s fine! I’m perfectly back to normal health-wise, and I gotta eat a lot if I wanna keep my strength up! This whole thing really taught me about how important your stamina is!”

“Well, don’t forget to eat a lot of veggies, too.”

“Sure thing,” Nayuta eagerly replied, grabbing a celery stick and crunching right into it.

Itsuki recalled Chihiro’s concerns about becoming a third wheel if he continued his frequent visits. “...Keep cooking nutritious stuff for her, okay, Chihiro?”

“S-sure...”

Like a mother regarding her young child, Chihiro nodded as he watched Nayuta continue to stuff her face.



About four-fifths of the way into the food, Haruto spoke up.

“Hey, it’s been a while since all five of us were here together, huh? Wanna play a game?”

“Sounds good,” Itsuki agreed. The other three had no objection.

“What should we play?”

“Hmm...”

Haruto looked up at the room's board-game shelf, thinking, before his eyes turned toward the bookshelves instead. They rested on a single heavy tome—*Kojien*, a volume published by Iwanami Shoten that's considered the definitive dictionary of the Japanese language.

"How about a game of Tahoiya?"

"Ooh..."

"Hmm..."

The competitive fire was already lit in Itsuki's and Nayuta's eyes.

"Tahoiya?" Miyako asked, looking at the board-game shelf. "Um, which one is that?"

Haruto stood up and took the dictionary off the bookshelf, placing it on the table. The sixth edition of *Kojien* included approximately 240,000 words, the most among mid-sized Japanese dictionaries, which made it the kind of large, blunt weapon of a hardcover book you'd expect a good dictionary to be.

"The dictionary?" Miyako asked, confused.

"Yeah. This is what we use to play Tahoiya."

As Haruto explained, Tahoiya is a game where players come up with pretend definitions for obscure words, then try to pick the actual definition from the fake entries. It is the Japanese-language version of a game that's called Fictionary in English; the name "Tahoiya" (which means 'a cabin used for boar hunting') stuck in Japan after that word came up in an early-1990's game show version. (Source: Wikipedia.)

The rules work like this:

1. A "picker" is chosen to select a word from the dictionary they think nobody else will know. (If a player knows the word, they have to say so, and the picker chooses another word.)
2. The picker writes the first sentence of the definition on a piece of paper, while the players make up definitions of their own for the word.
3. Once everyone is done, the picker shuffles the papers, assigns them numbers, and reads out all the definitions.
4. Players bet between one and three chips on the definition they think is correct. Each player starts with ten chips, and they're not allowed to bet on their own word.
5. The picker announces the correct answer. Choose the right one, and the picker awards you the number of chips you bet; get it wrong, and you must give your chips to the player who wrote that definition, as well as a one-chip penalty to the picker.
6. The dictionary then goes to the next picker. The game ends

once everyone has a turn as picker, and whoever has the most chips wins.

You're free, of course, to use a dictionary besides *Kojien*, but since the game requires obscure words your average person would never know, going with a definitive volume is always a good bet. In a way, it's the perfect game for honing the skills any professional novelist needs: knowledge and imagination to guess the right meaning; creativity and writing skill to create definitions that'll trip up other players; observation skill and intuition so you can figure out what kinds of definitions your competitors will come up with.

"Um," Miyako said, somewhat irritated, "if this is a game that requires pretty much every skill a novelist needs, I don't like my chances in it too much..."

"Good point." Chihiro nodded.

"Okay," Haruto replied, "then let's have it so me, Itsuki, and Nayu get only one minute to write a definition. You two get all the time you want. How's that?"

"All right. I think that'll work."

"I'm good with that."

Miyako and Chihiro accepted the offer. Itsuki and Nayuta looked much less satisfied.

"One minute...?"

"...That's pretty rough..."

"But I'm not gonna lose... I'm gonna show you the power of an anime-adapted novelist!"

"And I'm not gonna lose either, Itsuki."

Haruto smiled warmly at the now-enthusiastic pair, and his fighting spirit burned within him as well. "Shall we begin, then? Let's choose a picker."

After a quick rock-paper-scissors round, Chihiro got the first shot at it. Ten chips (technically coins borrowed from another board game on the shelf) and answer slips were passed around to everyone, with five larger sheets labeled (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5) placed on the table—the board people placed their bets on.

"Um..."

Chihiro thumbed through the dictionary, deciding on a word.

"...I got it," he finally said, all eyes upon him. "...*Hirokimochii*."

"Uh...*hirokimochii*?"

Miyako looked lost already. Chihiro had pronounced it with flat intonation. Was it a noun? A verb? A native Japanese word or something from a foreign language? The three novelists, meanwhile, already had their pens in hand, confidence written across their faces.

"You know, I actually majored in *hirokimochii* in college. I know a

ton about it.”

“Yeah, I can’t get enough of that *hirokimochii* feeling as I go into the bath.”

“I was a big fan of Hiroki Mochii’s work back in the day. I had all his books.”

“Huh? You all know it?” Miyako stared at them. “But you’re all saying different stuff...”

“Of course I do.”

“I totally love it.”

“He’s a household name!”

None of the trio knew what *hirokimochii* was, of course. They were just pretending in order to confuse the other players—a little off-the-board strategy, if you want to call it that, and another part of the fun.

The writers all had their definitions within a minute, while Miyako took over three before she handed her slip of paper to Chihiro. The picker shuffled the four slips with his own and numbered them.

“Okay, here we go. Number one: **The feeling of being comfortable and carefree.**”

“...That’s Nayu, isn’t it?” accused Miyako.

“Well, who knows?” Nayu deadpanned.

“Number two: **A Russian composer.**”

“Ooh, I could imagine a name like that from a foreign country!” Miyako said.

“There’s our first name,” chuckled Haruto.

“Way too simple,” Itsuki added.

“Huh?”

“Saying it’s a composer or philosopher or scientist from one country or another is a standard response in Tahoiya,” Haruto explained to Miyako. “You get a lot of place names and exotic dishes.”

“Ohh, I see...”

“Number three,” Chihiro continued, **“A piece of mochi rice cake stretched out very far.”**

“Wide mochi?” Itsuki couldn’t help but smile. “That’s ‘hiroi mochi’—the word itself. It’s hard to get ‘*mochii*’ from that.”

“Number four: **An Italian school of thoughtful enlightenment.**”

“That’s gotta be Prince Manwhore.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” Haruto said, brushing Nayuta off.

“And number five: **An ancient Greek institution.**”

“Schools of thought and institutions...” Itsuki pondered a moment. “We got some overlap. If both of those could’ve come from Haruto, does that mean one of them’s right...?”

“I’m sorry,” Miyako said. “Can you read them again?”

“Sure. Number one: **The feeling of being comfortable and carefree.** Number two: **A Russian composer.** Number three: **A piece**

of mochi rice cake stretched out very far. Number four: An Italian school of thoughtful enlightenment. Number five: An ancient Greek institution.”

“Hmm.” “Uhhh...” “Nyaaaa...” “Oh man, I have no idea... They all sound kinda right...”

The four of them thought it over. (Feel free to join them right now, if you want.)

“...Okay, place your bets on the one you think is right, on three. One, two, three.”

All four players sprang into action. Up to three chips could be bet at once, but everyone went with just one this time—Itsuki on #4, Haruto on #1, Nayuta #4, and Miyako #2.

“All right. The correct answer is...number three, a piece of mochi rice stretched out.”

“Wh-wha—?!”

“No way...”

“Ee-hee-hee...” Chihiro chuckled bashfully. “I guess it’s what we refer to as *noshi-mochi* today, those flattened rectangles of mochi.”

“Yeah, but *mochii*? With a long ‘i’?” Itsuki sounded unconvinced.

“Wow, the picker’s the only winner this round. Good job, Chihiro,” Haruto said, impressed.

Since nobody got it right, all four players gave Chihiro a chip, then passed out their bets to the other players.

“I’m number four,” Haruto announced, accepting his two chips.

“I’m number one.”

“And I’m number two.”

Nayuta and Itsuki each gained one chip for themselves.

“Itsuki,” Miyako asked, “didn’t you say number two was ‘too simple’ when he read it out?”

“Hmph. Psychological warfare is the name of the game.”

“Well, you sure tricked me, Itsuki...”

Itsuki gave his peeved friend a bold smile in reply.

Once the chips were passed around, the next turn began. Next up in the clockwise order was Itsuki, who stared intently at the *Kojien*.

“Okay, here’s the word... ***Resshingu***.”

“*R-resshingu*?”

“Think it’s got to do with dressing?”

“I had some just the other day. Real mellow, with a lot of body. It goes well with ham, I think.”

“Ohh, that, huh? That was kind of a fad in class for a while. We played it so much, the teacher banned it.”

Miyako and Chihiro made their confusion clear to the room, while Nayuta and Haruto played dumb as they wrote down their would-be definitions. Once they were done, Itsuki collected the slips.

“Number one: **When an animal’s hair bristles up and stands on end.**”

“Oh, that sounds right!” exclaimed Miyako.

“Number two: **A dramatist and critic from the German Enlightenment.**”

“Another name!”

“Number three: **The act of breaking in a piece of machinery.**”

“Ohhh, that sounds right, too...” Miyako’s eyebrows shot downward.

“Yeah,” Haruto agreed. “There’s that ‘-ing’ suffix. It sounds kinda like a verb.”

“Number four: **A low-class type of bedding.**”

“...Bedding? Oh!”

This was a simple combination of *retsu* (low-class) and *shingu* (bedding).

“That sounds kind of farfetched to me.” Haruto laughed. “But this is the sort of thing that winds up being right a lot...”

“Number five: **Salad dressing.**”

“That’s almost refreshingly straightforward!”

“...You think that was Chihiro?”

Haruto laughed again, while Nayuta recalled what Chihiro said when Itsuki read out the word.

“It—it’s not me! I would try to come up with something better than that!”

“So...”

The three other players looked at Miyako. “Uh, no?” she replied, her face reddening as she stared off in another direction.

“You don’t have a time limit, Myaa,” Nayuta gently said. “You can take all the time you want to come up with something.”

Miyako hung her head. “Nghh... Yeah...”

“Okay, time to bet. One, two...”

The chips began to fly. Haruto put two on #1, Nayuta one on #2, Miyako one on #4, and Chihiro one on #3.

“Okay. The correct answer is...” Itsuki paused, apparently pained. “Number two, a dramatist and critic from the German Enlightenment. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, to be exact.”

“Whoo-hoo!” shouted Nayuta, the only correct player. “You wrote a person’s name for the last question, so I thought you’d go with a name for the correct answer this time.”

“Oof, you knew exactly what I was up to...”

Itsuki’s tactic here was to implant the thought in players’ minds that a “person name” definition was a cheap escape of a move, then actually choose a name-based word to keep them from picking it.

“Hee-hee-hee! I know exactly how your mind works, Itsuki. After

all, I'm your *grrrrrrl*friend."

"...!"

Having Nayuta sidle up to him with that honey-tinged voice made Itsuki blush, but again, he didn't deny it now.

"Guys, can you make out on your own time?" Haruto curtly replied. Miyako and Chihiro nodded their agreement.

"Um, by the way, number one was Chihiro, number three was Haruto, and number four was Kanikou. Miyako's was the salad dressing."

"Aw, at least say *my* number, too!" Miyako protested.

Haruto and Chihiro exchanged smiles.

"I guess you and I were thinking along similar lines, Chihiro. We canceled each other out."

"I guess so. I thought it was good, but..."

"Okay, I'm the next picker," Nayuta said as she grabbed for the dictionary. "Mm... 'Picker' is fine, but being a 'licker' would be even better, ee-hee-hee...hee-hee-hee...*nyeee*-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee..."

Something about her own pun made Nayuta start giggling excessively.

"It is *way* too early for that," Itsuki protested, face a deep shade of red.

The word that Nayuta picked was:

"*Sasekkusu*."

"S-sase...?! That doesn't mean anything weird, does it? It's got 'sex' right in it!" Miyako flailed.

"I dunno. You tell me." Nayuta impishly smiled. "Maybe it means letting someone have sex with you, Myaa!"

"I—I wasn't imagining that!" Miyako half shouted, blushing the whole way.

Once the responses were turned in, Nayuta began reading the definitions.

"Um, number one: **A county in the western United Kingdom.**"

"Place names show up a lot," Haruto reminded the team.

"Number two: **An American tire maker.**"

"Sounds plausible," Chihiro said.

"Number three: **A British city.**"

"More UK stuff!"

"Number four: **A region in southeastern England.**"

"Oh, now it's England?!" Itsuki yelled. "That can't be a coincidence!"

"Number five: **The Latin word for 'six.'**"

"Ohh, I like that one," mused Haruto.

"Can you repeat those real quick?" Chihiro asked.

"Number one, **A county in the western United Kingdom.**

Number two, **An American tire maker**. Number three, **A British city**. Number four, **A region in southeastern England**. Number five, **The Latin word for ‘six.’**”

Nayuta grinned at the group of troubled players before her.

“Now place your bets. One, two...”

Itsuki placed one on #1, Haruto three on #4, Miyako one on #1, and Chihiro two on #4. Nayuta scrunched up her nose as she watched them.

“Well, the correct answer is number four.”

“Yes!”

“Nice!”

“That’s so mean.” Nayuta groaned. Not only did people get it right; Haruto and Chihiro both bet multiple chips on it, so she had to give up five chips.

“You know,” reflected Miyako, “now that I think of it, I think I’ve heard of the University of Sussex before. I wrote number three, so I figured it was one or four... How come none of you bet on three?”

“Ah, I just thought number three was written a little too simply to be a dictionary definition. I wrote number one—I’m borrowing a lot from Arthurian legend for my own series, so I did a lot of research on the UK a while back, and I’m pretty sure that name came up.”

Itsuki winced at Haruto. “And if it wasn’t number one, it had to be three or four for you, right? That’s how you could bet three chips on your pick. I was wavering between one and four myself, but...oof. I did number five, by the way.”

“Latin for ‘six?’ That sounds plausible, but the word is actually just ‘sex,’ so...”

“You knew?!”

Even if you didn’t know the meaning, you could always use your own knowledge to narrow down the options. This turn was in the bag for Haruto from the beginning.

The next picker was Haruto.

“All right. Here we go: **Herutsuru.**”

“Mmm... Again, no idea... Is that Japanese...?”

Miyako looked distressed—as she should, since her four chips put her firmly in last place. In order, the standings were: Chihiro (16), Haruto (13), Itsuki (9), Nayuta (8), and Miyako (4).

“Well,” Itsuki murmured, “I’m gonna have to get serious, or I’ll never make a comeback...”

“Same...,” Nayuta replied.

“That’s all of them... Okay, number one: **A Polish doctor.**”

“And our first name,” Itsuki said, scowling. “It *does* sound kinda like Pasteur...”

“Number two: **A sauce made from flying fish.**”

“Flying fish?”

“Yeah. It’s not unheard of to see them used in Japanese cuisine,” Chihiro explained to Miyako.

“Ooh, yeah, Japan has lots of fish sauces,” Itsuki added. “*Shottsuru* from Akita, for example. It’s good.”

“Number three: **An Austrian journalist.**”

“Another name... Hmm...,” Nayuta mused.

“If you ask me,” Itsuki whispered back, “you’re more likely to see a doctor in the dictionary than a journalist.”

“Number four: **A type of traditional Norwegian cuisine.**”

“And another cooking term,” Chihiro said, smiling. Having the highest stack of chips helped him relax a bit.

“Number five...” Haruto paused to chuckle a bit. “...Oh man. Number five: **One of the tools of hell.**”

“Pfft!”

“A hell-tool? That sounds like something a grade-schooler would add to his pretend role-playing game.” Nayuta laughed as she looked toward Miyako with sympathy. “Myaa, it’s not really sporting to throw the game just because you’re losing.”

“Why are you so sure I wrote that?!”

“...I didn’t think you’d do something so silly,” Chihiro added, also a bit disappointed.

“You too, Chihiro?! Again, why are you branding that as mine?!”

“All right,” Haruto said, ignoring Miyako’s protests. “Time to start betting. Number one, **A Polish doctor.** Number two, **A sauce made from flying fish.** Number three, **An Austrian journalist.** Number four, **A type of traditional Norwegian cuisine.** And number five, **One of the tools of hell.**”

The chips were cast. Itsuki put three on #2, Chihiro two on #1, Nayuta three on #3, and Miyako one on #1.

“The correct answer is...”

Haruto took a deep breath...

“Number three! Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl!”

“Wooo!”

“Nooo!”

Nayuta squealed as her big bet paid off, and Itsuki screamed as his did not.

“You got me,” Haruto sighed as he paid three chips to Nayuta, accepting one each from the other three players before announcing the other definitions.

“Number one was Nayu, number two Chihiro, Number four Miyako, and number five Itsuki.”

“Oh?”

Nayuta and Chihiro’s eyebrows perked up.

“Number five...”

“You wrote ‘the tools of hell,’ Itsuki?!”

Itsuki scrunched up his face. “...I was so focused on figuring out a way to come back that I ran out of time to think of an answer.”

“Aha! See? I *told* you it wasn’t me!” The rage was clear in Miyako’s voice.

Nayuta awkwardly averted her eyes. “Anyone can make mistakes.”

“Well, I believed in you. I knew you’d never give up until the end,” Chihiro warmly said, giving Miyako a soft smile.

Miyako just stared back at him.

This changed the standings to: Chihiro (16), Nayuta (14), Haruto (13), Itsuki (5), and Miyako (2).

“So between me, Nayuta, and Chihiro, whoever wins in the last turn wins it all, huh...?”

“Um,” a concerned-looking Miyako said, “I’m the last picker, but I only have two chips... What if I don’t have enough to give out to people?”

“...Oh yeah, what *does* happen? Lemme check real quick.”

Haruto did a quick check on the rules of Tahoiya with his phone.

“Hmm... Wikipedia doesn’t have anything to say about that...but back in the ‘90s game show version, if you ran out of chips, you could pawn things in your possession for more chips... Kind of a jokey thing.”

“Things in my possession?!”

“Ah, so I can get Myaa’s panties if I guess right this turn?”

Miyako blushed. “Why my *panties*, Nayuta?!”

“If a college girl needs to pawn something, that’s the standard, isn’t it?”

“It is?!”

“I’ll want a photo, too, please.”

“.....Miyako’s panties, huh?” Haruto nervously gulped. Now he was more into the competition than ever. “Nayuta, Chihiro... I’m gonna do whatever it takes to win this.”

“What are you saying, Fuwa?!” Miyako cried.

“And I’m going to get Miyako’s panties... Photo included!”

“Why are you throwing down the gauntlet on this?” Itsuki groaned.

“Huh?” Chihiro turned to Haruto. “Um... wait, Fuwa, do you have a thing for...?”

“Yeah,” Haruto said, face a little red but voice resolute. “I love her. She said no, but...”

“F-Fuwa...!” Miyako grew even redder.

“W-wait, you do?!” Nayuta’s eyes opened wide, glancing

alternately at Miyako, then Haruto. "...I had no idea Prince Manwhore already sank his poisoned fangs into Myaa...!"

"I didn't, okay?! She turned me down!"

Nayuta's face hardened as Miyako fell into more of a panic.

"...I could never allow Prince Manwhore to receive Myaa's panties. This competition is *mine*."

"I can't afford to lose this, not even to you, Nayu. I need those panties...!"

"Ugh! Again, why am I pawning off my panties?!" Miyako shouted, but it fell on deaf ears.

"...Can we just get started?" Itsuki, who was out of the game and had no interest in Miyako's panties, reminded them to keep things going.



Reluctantly, Miyako opened up the *Kojien* dictionary.

“Hmm... Let’s go with this.”

After a sizable amount of time, she gave them the word, betraying little confidence in her choice.

“*Shahyoushin*.”

“Oh, *shahyoushin*, huh? I had that a little while ago,” Itsuki casually offered.

Haruto and Nayuta, meanwhile, were in no mood for chitchat, eyes deadly serious as they thought up their definitions. Chihiro, a bit turned off by them both, contemplated his own path to victory.

The three of them were neck and neck. Sealing the deal involved both guessing the right meaning and extracting as many chips as possible from other players.

At long last...

“Okay, I’ll read them. One, **A female Chinese writer.**”

“A name?” Haruto said, lost in thought. “It *does* sound kinda Chinese...”

“Two, **A needle used to keep artificial flowers in place.**”

“*Shin*...or ‘needle’...”

“Do they use needles for that stuff?” a quizzical Chihiro asked.

“I dunno,” Haruto thoughtfully replied with a groan. “I dunno, but that makes it sound all the more likely...!”

“Um, three, **The desire to obtain fortune without hardship.**”

“Isn’t that *shakoushin*?” Haruto interjected.

“It could be another word with the same meaning,” Nayuta said, turning toward Itsuki. “If not, it sounds like someone who’s being a sore loser right now...”

Itsuki feigned great interest in the ceiling, innocently humming.

“Four, **Medical evaluation using photographs.**”

“Ohhh, *shin* meaning ‘evaluation’ here...”

“Hmm... That kind of jargon sounds real to me...”

Haruto and Nayuta sized each other up as they spoke.

“Five, **A Buddhist term meaning a heart that has thrown off earthly bonds and has almost approached enlightenment.**”

Chihiro raised his eyebrows, honestly impressed. “Oh, that sounds *really* plausible...!”

“Yeah,” replied Haruto. “If you told me that was a Buddhist thing, I’d totally believe it.”

Nayuta was less convinced. “Hmm, but don’t you think it’s too oddly specific?”

“I could narrow it down to a few things, but... Can you read them again, Miyako?”

“All right,” Miyako said to Haruto. “One, **A female Chinese**

writer. Two, A needle used to keep artificial flowers in place. Three, The desire to obtain fortune without hardship. Four, Medical evaluation using photographs. Five, A Buddhist term meaning a heart that has thrown off earthly bonds and has almost approached enlightenment.”

“Hmm...”

“Okay, time for your bets. One, two...”

The four players laid down their chips—three on #1 for Itsuki, three on #2 for Haruto, three on #4 for Nayuta, and one on #5 for Chihiro.

“Split opinions,” a nervous-sounding Nayuta observed.

“Yeah... It’d be hilarious if it was number three after all this, but I’m sure it’s not.”

“Right... Now for the answers. First, the correct response was number one, the Chinese author [called Xie Bingxin in English].”

“Wha...?!”

“Nyaaaa!”

“Ahh...”

“Oh?”

Three of the players looked chagrined. Itsuki, the only correct guesser, was merely surprised.

“...Well, so much for pawning my panties, huh?” announced Miyako, visibly relieved as she accepted a chip from each of the three losers and paid three to Itsuki. This left her safely with two chips at the end of the game.

“Aww... Well, I didn’t get the panties, but the game isn’t over yet.”

“Nope. Who wrote the fake definitions?” Nayuta asked, hurrying Miyako along. Since neither of them seized any chips from Miyako, the battle would be decided on who guessed whose entries.

“Um, number two is Nayu, number three is Itsuki, number four is Chihiro, and number five is Fuwa.”

Based on this, everyone tabulated their scores.

First, since nobody guessed Itsuki’s answer, he finished with eight chips. Nayuta paid three chips to Chihiro and received three from Haruto, ending with thirteen. Haruto paid three to Nayuta and received one from Chihiro, ending with ten. Finally, Chihiro paid one chip to Haruto and received three from Nayuta, ending with seventeen.

“I won, huh?” Chihiro bashfully said.

“Congrats!” Itsuki said, joining the rest in a round of applause.

“Great job,” Miyako marveled. “You beat three published authors!”

“Oh, it was just luck,” he modestly replied. “They had a handicap,

too.”

“Yeah.” Miyako smiled ruefully. “But I still totally blew it...”

“Ah...” Chihiro gave her an awkward look.

“I guess that means that you’re the best out of all of us at tricking people,” said Itsuki.

“Oh, no way,” a flustered Chihiro replied.

“Awww, Chihiro sure got me in the end, too... I’d hope for nothing less from my future brother-in-law...”

Chihiro attempted to deny this but stayed silent, realizing this future was actually kind of possible. The thought gave him mixed feelings.

“...You’d be my sister-in-law, Kani...?”

“Whoa, Chihiro! That’s not gonna be the future *for a while!*”

“Aww. Personally, I’d be happy to get married tomorrow.” Nayuta pouted, but her eyes were laughing at them.

“You’re going too fast! I just wanna enjoy the relationship we have right now—I mean... Ugh, forget it!”

There they all were—a reddened Itsuki; a happy-looking Nayuta; Miyako smiling with sadness in her eyes; and Haruto, looking at Miyako and sighing slightly. They had been hanging out here like always, eating and drinking and playing games—but something had also clearly changed. Something had changed, and all five of them realized it.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

I have a question for Nayuta! Why does my dick get hard when I think of sexy stuff?



Google it.

QUESTION

Nayuta, will you marry me?!



I'll kill you.

QUESTION

Hey, can I get your LINE or whatever?

Where do you live?

Hey, you got any nude pics?!



I hope it rots off.

Level 4

The official welcome-home party for Nayuta ended around ten PM, and Haruto, Miyako, and Chihiro left Itsuki's apartment soon after. Nayuta, on the other hand, stuck around. This was hardly the first time Itsuki and Nayuta had been alone in here. However, it *was* the first time since they became lovers.

They sat next to each other by the *kotatsu*, trying to judge what the other was thinking in between sidelong glances.

"...All alone, huh?" Nayuta asked, fidgeting with her hands.

"...Guess so," Itsuki stonily replied.

They lingered in this happy (if frustrating) moment for a while; occasionally, the silence was broken by these little conversations.

"Um, th-this room's kind of hot, isn't it?" Nayuta suddenly exclaimed, completely failing to sound natural.

"Is it?"

"Y-yeah. I'm starting to sweat a little. Can I use your shower?" She was blushing fully by the end of the question.

"Um, sure," a restless Itsuki replied.



Itsuki sat there, tortured by the sound of the shower, until the noise stopped. Nayuta came out to the living room soon after, wiping her hair with a towel. She was naked—or would have been, if she hadn't borrowed one of Itsuki's T-shirts. It was too big for her, hiding her hip area, but at first glance, one couldn't tell if she had anything on under it. Almost certainly no bra, at least.

"O... Okay. Done with the shower."

"Cool."

"What about you, Itsuki?"

"Um, yeah..."

Pressed on by the blushing Nayuta, Itsuki headed for the bathroom and started showering. As the hot water beat against his body, he thought.

...I see where this is going... There's only one thing this can lead to,

isn't there...?

They had all come to celebrate her hospital discharge, eating and playing games like usual, and he figured they'd all go their separate ways after that. But he'd also be lying if he said he wasn't expecting this. He had done his Net research just this morning. No matter how tiny and trivial the question, *somebody's* already asked it online, and someone's already answered it. He had even found a well-reviewed brand of condoms on the Net to purchase. The Internet is so goddamn helpful.

He had hit the books, and he had the gear he needed.

...Get it together, Itsuki Hashima. You're gonna become a man tonight.

He carefully washed every inch of his body, making sure all the soap bubbles were down the drain before he turned off the water. Once he was out of the shower, he toweled himself off, put on some underpants, dried his hair, and threw on a T-shirt.

After a few deep breaths, he emerged from the bathroom and stepped into the living room, discovering a red-faced Nayuta quietly sitting on the bed.

"Uh... I showered," he reported.

"You did, huh?"

Nayuta slowly stood up, turned her body toward Itsuki—and inexplicably pumped her fists in the air.

"All right! Let's do this!"

"Um, okay," Itsuki replied, raising a fist of his own.

Just facing her like this made his heart feel ready to burst. He was like the hero of a role-playing game, about to begin the ultimate showdown against the Archfiend Overlord or whatever. *Calm down*, he told himself. *Calm down, Itsuki Hashima. Even Goku and Vegeta had sex at some point. If they can do it, why can't I?*

"Fsssshhhhhh..."

Nayuta, face so red that steam was hissing out of her head, lowered her fists and brought her hands to her T-shirt.

"Sasekkusu!"

With a shout, she whipped the shirt off.

Her braless breasts, caught in the fabric, jiggled around a bit. Itsuki had researched how to take off a bra, but it looked like that wouldn't be necessary. She had no panties on, either.

She was in a T-shirt, and now she wasn't, and that meant there was literally not a stitch on her.

A little embarrassed, she clasped her hands behind her back, revealing her entire naked form to Itsuki. The sight of the girl he loved the most in life in her purest form captivated Itsuki's eyes and heart completely. He stared slack-jawed at her.

"...What—what do you think?!" she asked with a little too much

energy, partly to hide her shyness, and that was finally enough to bring Itsuki back to reality.

“Y... Your...”

“...My?”

“Hair...”

“Hair? ...What?”

“Your... Your hair... It’s silver there, too!”

“*That’s* the first thing you have to say?!” she fired back, her eyes flaring.

“I mean, I was kinda wondering for a while, so...”

His Net research told him the carpet didn’t always match the drapes, but that wasn’t the case for Nayuta.

“...You’re adorable. The cutest in the universe.”

Even Itsuki was surprised at how readily the words came out.

“...Cuter than the ultimate little sister you wanna find?” Nayuta asked, glancing up at him through her lashes.

“That sister hasn’t been born yet, so I can’t really say...” Itsuki realized he was being too honest, but he continued anyway. “...But for now, at least, you’re *provisionally* the cutest in the universe. So wear it with pride!”

“I’m not sure about the ‘provisionally’ part, but thank you.” Nayuta looked down, still a tad bashful. “And the provisionally cutest in the universe is yours. Heart, body, and everything else. Enjoy.”

“...I—I will.”

With that, Itsuki removed his own T-shirt, stripping down to just his undies. As he brought a hand to his waistband:

“...Should we turn out the light?”

Nayuta shook her head. “I want to see you naked really bad, too, so no, thank you.”

“...Maybe, like, just a little night-light?”

“No.”

“.....”

“All right! Down they go! Show me everything you have, Itsuki!”

He had just taken in everything Nayuta had to offer. He was in no position to say no.

Taking a firm breath to steel his resolve, Itsuki lowered his underpants. Naked, he approached Nayuta and pressed his lips to hers. This was different from the first kiss they had at the hospital. This was more forceful, as if they were devouring each other, and it was soon followed by another, and another, and soon, whichever one it was pulling the other down, they had fallen in bed. The foldout single struggled under the weight of two people, and it wasn’t long before it began creaking in protest.



.....
.....
.....

“Okay, Itsuki, time for round two!”

It was not terribly long after both of them came down from their climax. Nayuta’s body was draped invitingly over Itsuki’s, and she was already pleading with him.

“...Isn’t this when the screen fades out, and then I wake up in the morning and you’re sleeping next to me and I look at you and get all wistful and emotional, like ‘Now we really *are* connected’ and stuff?”

Nayuta scowled at this half-groaned question. “What kind of nonsense is that, Itsuki? The night’s only beginning.”

“But I only just finished. I can’t go again right this minute...”

Nayuta fired a passionate eye toward Itsuki’s hanging member.

“If you get beaten down, you gotta stand back up. That’s what being the protagonist is about!”

“Don’t act like it’s that deep!” Itsuki shouted, face blushing hard.
“My dick isn’t the hero of a novel!”

“If you want to be the hero, you gotta go past your limits!”

“I don’t need my *dick* to be a hero!”

Nayuta’s clear blue eyes pulsed with intense passion. She half-panted, almost roaring like a video-game final boss.

“It’s all right... I’ll make it come back to life, again and again...”

Her face approached the bottom half of his body.

“Wh-what are you doing...?! St-stop, Kanikou...!”

“Nya-ha-ha. ♥ Uh-uh. ♥”

...It had been three years since Nayuta Kani first read Itsuki’s novels and fell in love with someone she had yet to meet. Now the genius writer, blessed with one of this generation’s most intense imaginations and brimming with the passion of a nineteen-year-old girl, was finally allowed to release her feelings from the dam, and one single repetition was not going to be enough.

And this gluttonous feast, conducted by the animal of love once known as Nayuta Kani, continued on until Itsuki was covered in her fluids, wrung completely dry himself, and begging, “Please...please have mercy...,” like the protagonist from a particularly sadistic dating sim.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

I have a question for the men: Do you like it in text form, or as a video?



I won't ask what you're talking about, but, uh...either. Text or manga, too.



I'm okay with either, too, but I'm mainly a gamer.



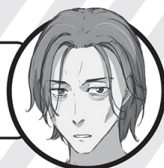
Art is fine, but I'll always take the real thing instead.



Who cares?
The sex shops are always open.



Text.



Oh, gee, whatever could you mean?
I'm soooo confused...

The Rival

One evening, several days after Nayuta's return party, Chihiro discovered something unusual on the living room floor of Itsuki's apartment as he came over to clean like usual. It was some sort of disc-shaped machine, about two inches tall and almost a foot across.

"Hey, Itsuki, what's this?"

Itsuki turned around from his berth at his work desk. "Oh, it's a robo-vacuum. I won it in a raffle at the awards event."

There was indeed a raffle at the GF Bunko New Writers Contest held earlier in November, and in it, Itsuki had won the latest model of robotic vacuum cleaners. It was so new, in fact, it hadn't even gone on sale yet at the time of the event. They had finally got enough inventory to send one over to Itsuki that day.

Chihiro carefully peered at it. "Hmm... So this is a robo-vac, huh...?"

He had an interest in home appliances, but he always figured he could clean for himself just fine, so he'd never had much interest in these before now.

"Yeah, it should be done charging. Why don't we try it out?"

Itsuki stood up, a bit excited, and flipped the switch. He was rewarded by the sound of a cute female voice saying, "Beginning cleaning"—not a stereotypical robot drone, but a regular human voice.

"Whoa, it talks!"

"It sure does," Itsuki said, smiling at Chihiro's surprise.

The robot trundled over the floor away from the charger at a volume far quieter than the vacuum Chihiro normally used.

"...Will there even be anything for it to clean?" Chihiro asked. With him cleaning the floors regularly, there were no obvious dirty spots, so it was hard to see if the newbie was making any difference.

"Let's give it a test," Itsuki said, rubbing an eraser on his desk a few times and sprinkling the rubbings on the floor. "I think it responds to voice commands... Come here!"

"All right," the robo-vac said, coming toward Itsuki.

"Whoa, it listened to you."

When it approached the area with the rubbings, it began to rotate

around for a while—and as they watched, all the bits of eraser were sucked inside.

“Wow... It really *is* a vacuum cleaner.”

“Yep. Kinda cute, huh? Almost like it’s caught its prey or something.”

Itsuki smiled, enjoying the novelty, then made some more eraser rubbings for it to clean. The robo-vac instantly sucked it all up.

“Ha-ha! Hungry little thing.”

“Yeah...”

Chihiro chuckled a bit. Itsuki was acting like he was feeding a small animal in a cage.

The two of them watched the device do its work for a while. It was slow and had a tendency to go in a random direction whenever it bumped into a wall or the bed, so it often retraced its own steps. There didn’t seem to be much progress in the actual cleaning.

“...Hey, Itsuki,” an irritated Chihiro asked, “wouldn’t it be faster if I did it anyway?”

Itsuki nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. I’ll let you do the honors today. Start charging!”

“All right,” the robo-vac said as it trundled over to its charging port—then, with a “Beginning charging” notice, it stopped.

“That’s a pretty neat *toy*, but humans are better at cleaning than machines, don’t you think?” Chihiro said triumphantly.



Three days later, Chihiro was back at Itsuki’s apartment. Itsuki was out on a date with Nayuta and wouldn’t be eating in tonight, so Chihiro was just here to clean, cook enough for the next few days, and head home.

...What’s a date like anyway?

Chihiro had never had a partner of that sort before, so she understood what a “date” was only in the intellectual sense. Maybe it was kind of like back when Itsuki took her to the aquarium? And come to think of it, Itsuki promised her then that they’d go somewhere else soon, but between the *All About My Little Sister* anime and everything else, he got really busy, and it kind of fell through the cracks.

...He probably forgot all about that promise.

It wasn’t like there was someplace they both *had* to go together, but it still saddened her a little. Itsuki dating Nayuta meant that if he had the time for a date, she’d be his first priority. Maybe he’d never fulfill that promise at all now.

Thus, she felt a bit forlorn as she put the groceries she'd brought into the refrigerator and headed to the living room to start cleaning. She found the robo-vac pattering around.

"But *I'm* cleaning." She sighed to herself as she watched it go. Then:

"Huh?"

Chihiro realized the robot was acting far differently from three days ago. It was moving much better. At their first meeting, there was no rhyme or reason to how it moved; it just wandered around, hit something, then went off in some other crazy direction. Now it was clearly covering every inch of the floor, and when it neared a wall, it extended an arm out to wipe the dust off the edges. Even when it reached the legs of the bed, it didn't just bash into them but instead deftly maneuvered its way around.

"It's gotten smarter...!"

It had learned the structure of the room and how to move as efficiently as possible.

"It's just a vacuum cleaner...but it's like something out of science fiction."

To someone like Chihiro, who did almost all household chores by hand and never had anything to do with high-tech gadgets, it was a shock. If the robo-vac kept learning, it could very well come to the same conclusions.

As she watched, the robo-vac scoured every nook and cranny of the floor, expertly cleaning it up. It seemed at least up to the quality of a human with a broom.

"...But cleaning is *my* job..."

Something was clouding Chihiro's mind now. If Itsuki ate out on dates like this more often, that meant she wouldn't have to cook as much. And if this robot took all her cleaning responsibilities, that meant Chihiro would be an even less frequent part of Itsuki's daily routine. Her presence in his life would be whisked away like the dust on the ground.

"Low battery. Recharge required."

Chihiro spotted the robo-vac rolling over to the charging port. Reflexively, she went over to the kitchen.

"Come here!"

"All right."

The machine obediently went over to the kitchen.

"....."

It spun around, searching for something to clean, as Chihiro silently closed the door between the kitchen and living room.

"Low battery. Recharge required."



It tried to make it over to the charging port, but the door blocked its way.

“Ooh,” Chihiro said with a smile, “I thought you were the latest model, but you can’t even open a door?”

The robo-vac did not respond and simply bumped against the door repeatedly. “Low battery. Recharge required,” it repeated over the next ten minutes or so, before it finally came to a stop, silent for good.

“Hee-hee...”

Staring down at the dead machine, Chihiro flashed an evil smile. Then she snapped out of it.

“*What* am I doing...?”

She heaved a self-effacing sigh, picked up the robo-vac, and ferried it to the charger. The indicator light on the disc came back on, then began flashing.

“...Sorry,” she apologized.

“Do not worry about it,” the robot replied. Apparently, it responded to more than just commands. Chihiro had no idea why the manufacturer saw fit to include *that* feature, but she did feel a little better about the whole thing.

“Thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

Chihiro fixed her gaze upon the suddenly talkative robo-vac, then gave it a gentle, appreciative pat on its top panel.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What is Makina Kaizu's secret to good health?



There's no real "secret" to it. I wake up at seven each morning for a little sunbathing, and I'm always in bed by midnight. I make sure my diet includes vegetables, natto, and yogurt every day. No smoking. No drinking. If I'm catching up on my recorded anime, I'm doing step exercises the whole time. When I'm free, I swim or go jogging at the gym. And I *always* get my physical every year.

...I wish Itsuki and his friends would take after you.



Yeah, that's nothing special...but keeping it up for years on end isn't something just anyone can do, you know...?

Encounters and Reunions

One day in early December, Haruto visited Gift Publishing to discuss work stuff with his editor and ran into veteran writer Makina Kaizu in front of the elevator.

“Hello, Fuwa,” Kaizu said, sounding as gloomy as usual. “Another edit meeting?”

Haruto nodded at him. “Yeah. You too?”

“Me too. I just wrapped up, so I’m heading home.”

“Ah, I see. Hope you’re not too busy.”

Haruto was just about to nod and leave when Kaizu stopped him. “Oh, actually, Fuwa...”

“Yes?”

“I heard Hashima and Kani started dating. It’s nice to be young, isn’t it...?”

Kaizu’s editor, by the way, was GF Bunko editor in chief Satoshi Godo, an eyewitness to the hospital scene.

“Ha-ha... I guess so.”

Haruto gave him a vague smile as he wondered just how far the story had spread. Kaizu, meanwhile, flashed a glum, leering smile.

“But how about *you*, Fuwa?”

“How about me what?”

“You know, that new writer with big tits.”

“...Honestly, I don’t know what to do with her,” he said with a pained grin.

This new writer was Ui Aioi, who won the grand prize at the recent 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest. She had been attending a school for aspiring novelists that Haruto held a guest lecture at once, and the two of them wound up in a mid-class argument that apparently changed her entire approach to writing—and ever since, she’d been smitten with him. And while he certainly didn’t mind her respect as a writer, or even as a teacher, Ui was clearly trying to build a bridge between that and a not-so-platonic relationship.

“She’s invited me out to eat a few times since...and I’m still finding a way to dodge it every time.”

“Ooh, I don’t like the sound of that. If you aren’t interested, you should just say so. Then I can swoop in and whisk this wounded, busy

beauty off her feet.”

“You are *so* sleazy,” Haruto countered. “But, like, I know just coming out and saying so is probably what I oughtta do...and yet whenever we’re together, I start thinking twice about it.”

“...Yeah, well, those tits and all...”

“Exactly,” he gravely nodded. “If we ever met alone and she came up to me with those, then I might just fall for her whether I’ve got another girl in mind or not.”

Haruto didn’t exactly have high hopes for his ability to resist temptation. That was doubly true now that his friend Itsuki Hashima had recently gotten a girlfriend. He hadn’t heard it from the horse’s mouth or anything, but he assumed Natsuki swiped Itsuki’s V-card the night of her welcome-home party. Itsuki was his friend, his rival, and something of a little-brother figure to him, and honestly, the lead he appeared to have in the imaginary race between them was a cause of concern.

Miyako had clearly said no to Haruto. There was no need to be all chaste—he knew this was all for his own sake.

He *was* attracted to Ui’s chest, and the rest of her looks, too, and his words driving her all the way to her professional debut painted her in a very positive light to him. If she pushed any harder in the current state of things, there was every chance she’d push him right into the kind of relationship she wanted.

“Ahh, yes, I completely understand,” Kaizu said, earnestly agreeing. “That’s the way men are. But you can’t run from her forever, can ya? As a man and as a writer she looks up to.”

“No,” Haruto said, meekly shaking his head.

“Well, why don’t you take her out for drinks sometime? Not just you and her, but as kind of a social gathering between writers. I could join in, y’know, and I won’t hesitate to talk to her and her big tits, too.”

...It was funny how he framed this as a way of helping Haruto out, of all things.

“So, like, kind of a writing industry mixer?”

Kaizu’s eyes stared into blank space. “Christmas *is* coming up, y’know...and I hate to be alone...”

Haruto sighed. “Well...having multiple people there *would* be helpful. I’ll try going with that...”

“Perfect. Hee-hee-hee... My first drinking party in ages... I’m gonna rock this!”

Between Kaizu’s gloomy face and suppressed giggling, Haruto couldn’t help but laugh.



Once he wrapped up his own editorial meeting, Haruto texted Ui about holding a meetup with Kaizu and several other writers. He didn't have to wait long for a reply.

I'd love to join! Aoba Kasamatsu, one of the runners-up, lives in Tokyo, too. I'll ask her to come along.

She wasn't insisting on being alone with him. That came as a relief.

Great. Thank you! And I'll invite Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani.

Haruto followed this up with a quick invite text to Itsuki. Again, it didn't take long to hear back.

Kanikou doesn't want to, so I can't.

...Apparently, they were together right that moment. It *would* be kind of weird to have a preestablished couple at a mixer like this, so no worries.

Still, he wanted to keep it even between the sexes. Bringing Miyako and Ui together sounded like a bomb just waiting to go off, so Haruto struck one more person from the list. Who else could he invite...?

He thought about this as he walked out of his publisher's building, only to find a familiar face.

"Hello there, Fuwa," Chihiro Hashima said, jogging up to him.

"Hey, Chihiro. Heading over to Itsuki's place?"

"No, he's out today, so I'm just making dinner and going home."

"Ah, I see."

Haruto thought for a moment. Here was a guy, second year in high school; gets along easily with people; cares for them; a handsome kid, almost in an androgynous kind of way. And since he had a writer as a brother, he could keep up with conversations about nerd stuff and the publishing business. His presence as an underage participant would keep Ui from doing anything too forward, and it'd also turn it into a nice, decent dinner out without dragging on for too long.

"Fuwa?" Chihiro quizzically asked.

"...Chihiro," Haruto half begged, "are you free this Sunday?"



It was evening the following Sunday. Haruto was at an Italian-style bar; the place was decorated smartly without being too high-end and boasted decent-priced food and drink. It was apparently popular for girls' nights out and the like, but it had only just opened for the day, so things weren't very busy yet.

Counting him, there were six people at their table—three men and three women, facing one another from their respective sides. The men's side featured Haruto Fuwa, Makina Kaizu, and Chihiro Hashima; the women's side had Ui Aioi, Aoba Kasamatsu, and... Ashley Ono.

Chihiro mentioned to her that he was going out with Haruto and a few others, and she insisted on joining in. Haruto was *extremely* resistant to having someone like Ashley at this mixer, but he couldn't think of any other women who would fit in, and having a tax accountant to talk things over with the new writers would help them out going forward, so he had no reason to turn her down. Of course, if he had been around to hear Ashley whisper "Haruto Fuwa, handsome anime-adapted novelist... Now that could work..." when she reached out to him, he probably wouldn't have been so optimistic.

From the far end, they were lined up with Chihiro facing Ashley, Kaizu facing Aoba, and Haruto facing Ui. As far as clothing, Chihiro was in a standard pair of jeans and a hoodie, Haruto in a casual jacket. Ashley had her usual red dress. Kaizu was sporting a well-pressed, attractive dress jacket, much nicer than the wrinkly mess he brought to the awards party. Aoba had a checkered skirt and a turtleneck sweater on. And, while Ui's knit dress wasn't open around the chest like her outfit from the party, it still followed her natural curves closely and made her ooze erotic energy.

"Um, well, how about we order some drinks?" Haruto suggested after they all introduced themselves.

"Oolong tea," Kaizu immediately decided.

"Um, I'll have oolong tea, too," Chihiro said.

"Hmm," Ashley mused as she studied the drink menu, "I'll get one of their special sangrias, red, please."

Ui looked at her menu, then up at Haruto. "What will you get, Fuwa?"

"I'll go with a beer for now."

He'd been considering wine, what with this being an Italian place, but he didn't know much about it, so he figured beer was safer to start with.

"I'll do the same thing, then," Ui said with a smile. "What about

you, Kasamatsu?"

"...Cranberry juice," Aoba replied, not bothering to hide her poor mood. She'd been nervous and excited when she first came in, but she'd been acting like this ever since the moment she saw Nayuta Kani wasn't in the crowd.

They called over a waiter to order the drinks, along with some marinated olives, prosciutto, and other light bites.

"...What's got you down, Kasamatsu?" Haruto ventured with a chuckle.

"...I came because I heard Kani would be here. I guess that was a lie."

Aoba stared straight at Ui. She was a huge fan of Nayuta Kani, and anyone who read her prizewinning work, *Memories of the Sky*, could tell it was heavily influenced by Nayuta's novels.

"I just said I heard Fuwa was going to invite Kani. I didn't guarantee she would show up," Ui said awkwardly.

"I *did* invite her," Haruto said, "but she said she had a date with her boyfriend."

Although she was still peeved, Aoba flicked her eyebrows upward a few times with interest. "Her—her boyfriend? I should have known Kani had a fulfilling private life, too."

"Yeah. And actually, the guy is the older brother of Chihiro over there."

"What?!" Aoba shot a look at Chihiro, sizing up his face. "...If he's your brother, he must be incredibly handsome. I have to hand it to Kani..."

Haruto reflexively laughed at Chihiro's distress.

"In fact, I think you've met him before. Itsuki mentioned you exchanged a few words with him at the awards show."

Aoba gave him a look. "Huh?"

"He debuted alongside me, actually. His name's Itsuki Hashima. You know, the guy who won the robo-vac in the raffle?"

"Ahh!"

That finally rang a bell with her. When Itsuki had stepped up onstage to accept his prize, he gave a little speech about how he was "gonna build a whole new era." Aoba then confronted him after the party ended, seeking him out just so she could say "I'm going to build that new era" to his face and storm off.

"And he's with Kani...?" she asked, looking a bit lost.

"He wasn't at the time," Haruto added as he watched Aoba grow visibly paler. "But now, yeah."

"I can't...believe I said that to Kani's boyfriend..."

"I really don't think he minded at all," Chihiro interjected.

"R-really?" Aoba replied, clinging to hope.

“Oh, for sure. If anything, he thought it was fun to see. Of course, I bet Nayu would be pretty pissed if she heard you dissed him. He’s pretty special to her, and so is his work.” Haruto gave her a smile that wasn’t entirely kind.

“I-is he? I had no idea he was the kind of writer someone like Kani would have praise for... I better start reading...”

Haruto couldn’t help but snicker to himself. The mere fact Nayuta praised his work had completely changed Aoba’s mind about Itsuki.

The drinks arrived, and the party began to order their main courses.

“Okay, cheers, guys!”

They all clinked their glasses. Ashley drank at her own pace, pecking at the olives now and then; Chihiro sipped at his oolong tea, keeping a nervous eye out for the people around him; Aoba pouted to herself while nibbling on the fried pasta sticks provided to the table; and Ui just longingly gazed at Haruto’s face.

There was *no* conversation.

When he’d heard Ui was coming to this mixer, Kaizu was raring to go, all “Don’t you worry, Fuwa, I’m gonna use this chance to wrap li’l Aioi around my finger!” and so on, but ever since he walked in here, he had barely spoken a word.

Haruto eyed Kaizu as he silently drank his tea. He knew the type. When it came to mixers like this, he was **all bark and no bite**. Even in college, people like him would join these things whenever a friend asked them to help even out the numbers. Before the meetup, they’d brag to all their male friends about how they were totally gonna take home a girl afterward—but the moment they were actually faced with the opposite sex, they’d turn into timid little puppies.

It wouldn’t bother Haruto that much if they just sat there eating, nothing exciting happened, and they went home. It’d actually be good for him, in fact. But he’d always had a hard time leaving well enough alone when he felt the situation could be improved. This was a social party, and he wanted it to be something everyone could have fun with.

“So how’s the revision process going with you guys?” he said to Ui and Aoba, trying to sound jovial.

At this point, new writers would be working with their editors to revise their submitted work for publication.

“We’ve finished revising Volume 1,” Ui said, “and I’m writing Volume 2 now. It’s set to release in January.”

The way novels that won new-writer contests got published varied from company to company. Some labels put them all out at once, making a yearly “Rookie Extravaganza”-type event out of it, while others just stuck them in the regular schedule whenever they were

ready. GF Bunko was in the latter camp, so books that placed in the same contest commonly saw the light of day months, even upward of a year apart. Haruto's first volume was published a good three months ahead of Itsuki's, for example.

"January, huh? Sounds like pretty smooth sailing. Of course, winning the grand prize and all, it must've been pretty complete to start with."

Ui bashfully nodded. "Thank you very much. Just thinking I'm on the same stage as you, Fuwa, it's making me nervous all over again."

"Ah, that's how everyone is before they debut. Isn't that right, Kaizu?"

"Yes, yes... About a month before *my* first publication, I was so nervous, I thought I was gonna have an ulcer. At one point, I seriously considered asking them to cancel the whole thing." Kaizu paused for a moment, reminiscing to himself, then grinned. "But another person I debuted with, you know, *she* acted like it was nothing at all. Like she couldn't wait to get her book into readers' hands."

As one of the winners of the 1st New Writers Contest, Makina Kaizu got to go up on stage with three other people. Now, over a decade later, he was the only one left in the industry.

"You were all the same way?" Ui asked, reassured.

"Well," Haruto said, "I *still* get kinda nervous when one of my new volumes comes out."

"Me too," Kaizu added. "At this rate, I suppose I'll never get used to it."

"My..." Ui didn't look so reassured anymore.

"...Is that because you're not confident in your own work?" Every word from Aoba was dripping with spite.

"Guess that's not a problem with you?" Haruto said with a chuckle.

"Of course not."

"When is your book coming out?" Ui asked, evoking a wince from Aoba.

"...We're aiming for March, more or less."

"Aiming for, huh? Not done revising yet?"

Aoba blushed a bit at Haruto. "Well, unlike your typical template otherworld fantasy, mine is harder to handle. Plus, my editor keeps giving me all this irrelevant feedback..."

"Which editor was that?" Haruto asked.

"Yamagata," she replied, peeved.

"Oh, that's the same lady as Nayu... Oh hey, did you know? Nayuta Kani's first work, *The Silvery Landscape*—apart from typos and stuff, what got published was pretty much exactly what she submitted to the contest. The printed book was wrapped up before the award

ceremony, even.”

It sounded like a casual aside, but Haruto made sure there were some fangs to it. Aoba, sensitively picking up on that, wrinkled her nose.

“...What are you trying to say?”

“Oh, nothing,” Haruto replied, playing dumb as she glared at him. “I just mean, like, it’s great to be confident in your work, but there’s no need to pick on other people’s novels and say they’re all from a ‘template,’ you know? That’s all.”

“.....”

Aoba fell silent, pouting, and started crunching her pasta sticks again. A vaguely awkward silence descended, one that continued even after the entrees were served. It was Ui who finally tried to break the tension.

“Um, by the way, what do you all like to do when you’re not working?”

“When I’m alone, I’m usually reading or gaming or watching anime,” Haruto offered. “I go to Itsuki’s place to play board games with him and Chihiro and the gang, too.”

Ui gave him an odd look. “Board games...? Like, Monopoly or Life or...?”

Haruto snickered. “Yeah, I guess those are board games everyone in Japan would know about...but a lot of the games *we* play come from Germany.”



“Germany?”

“Yeah. Board games are super popular in Germany, and like a million of them come out there every year. Some are just these little quick things with simple rules, but others might take four hours to finish a whole game. They can be themed after war, or farming, or auctioning, or building towns—all kinds of things. A lot of them look fancy, too, or come with tons of neat little extras.”

“That sounds kind of interesting. Would I be able to join you next time?”

“Oh, that’d be great,” Haruto immediately replied with a smile. Then his face tensed up. He had just created another excuse for them to meet again. “Wh-what do *you* like to do, Kaizu?” he asked, craving a change of subject.

“Hmm... Well, apart from work, I like to jog or go swimming at the gym, I suppose...”

“You like to stay fit, huh?” an impressed Ui said.

Kaizu smiled at her with his singularly unhealthy-looking face. “A writer’s body is his greatest asset, after all... You should all be careful, too... No matter how talented you are, if your body breaks down, you can’t write a thing after that.”

He was speaking straight to Ui and Aoba in the gravest of tones. “I’ll keep that in mind,” Ui replied with a nod.

“Uh,” Aoba grunted, before nodding herself.

“But what about you, little brother?” Kaizu said, turning the conversation to Chihiro.

“Oh, uh, me? Well... I like to cook, and clean around the house, and study.”

“Huh...?”

Kaizu sounded a tad surprised by this. Ui and Aoba looked similarly impressed.

“Yes,” Ashley proudly interjected, “Chihiro here is a wizard with a mop, *and* in the kitchen. He’s the perfect person!”

“Why are *you* so proud of that?” Kaizu said, glaring at her.

“Do you ever hang out with friends?”

“Oh, I join in my brother’s game nights,” Chihiro said to Ui, “and I go out with my school friends sometimes.”

“Do you have any other hobbies?” asked Kaizu.

“...Well... Building plastic models.”

“Like Gundam and stuff?”

“Yeah, Gundam.”

“Really? You like that stuff, Chihiro?”

Haruto latched on to the topic. The two had hung out with each other many times by now, but this was news to him.

“Y-yeah... I got into it once I started building the models my brother left at home.”

“Wow. I like building those a lot, too, actually.”

“Really?!” The bashfulness on Chihiro’s face melted into joy.

“Yeah. They’re nice, you know? The work gets me out of my head. Do you paint them and everything?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty hardcore.”

“Do you go that far, too, Fuwa?”

“Of course. A lot of the newer kits go into excruciating detail on part coloration, so you don’t *have* to paint them, but when you do, it’s like a Gundam model of your very own, you know? It feels so different.”

“I know what you mean!” Chihiro nodded at Haruto, eyes gleaming. “It’s fun to go away from the official design and come up with your own color scheme, too.”

Kaizu intervened with a nervous laugh. “Heh-heh-heh... If we’re talking about plastic models, I hope you’ll allow a twenty-year veteran to join in. When I was first learning how to paint, I’d take the models I assembled and paint them all in pink. I’d do stuff like make a Char Aznable–model Qubeley and a Char Aznable–model Wing Gundam.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Right?” Chihiro said. “Oh hey, is it true you used to need glue to assemble Gundam models?”

“Mm? Oh, that’s undeniably true, yes...but if you’re asking me that, you’re assuming I was building models back then, aren’t you...? Because I wasn’t. They did away with the glue requirement well over twenty years ago.”

“Oh! Um, I’m sorry!”

Chihiro felt the need to apologize when Kaizu looked so glum, but Kaizu laughed it off.

“...Ah, it’s all right. I’m sure someone in his late thirties might as well be a fossil from your perspective. What have you been making lately, by the way?”

“Well, I put together a Neo Zeong a little while ago.”

“Pfft!”

Haruto burst out laughing, while Kaizu seemed fairly surprised himself. “...I’ve never met anyone who made that before,” he said.

“...Me neither. I did see a Dendro at my friend’s house once, but...”

The Neo Zeong is one of the largest in the line of 1:144 scale models on the market, close to three feet high when complete. That, plus the lack of space in most Japanese households, makes it out of reach for most people in the nation.

“Yeah, Itsuki got it for my birthday.”

“Giving a Neo Zeong as a birthday present is crazy enough, but... Oh, do you have any photos?” Haruto was getting a little excited now.

“Sure.”

“Can I see them?”

“All right.” Chihiro nodded, taking out his phone and searching through his photo roll. “Here we go,” he said as he handed it to Haruto, while Kaizu peered in for a look.

“Whoa...!”

“Hmm...?!”

The picture on the screen took their breath away. They had both seen completed examples of the Neo Zeong on the Net, but this...

“This... It’s sparkly.”

“Yeah. All that decoration...”

The one in Chihiro’s photo was decorated top to bottom with rhinestones, making it literally shine in the indoor lighting. “If you just build it like normal,” he explained to his dumbfounded audience, “there’s a lot of empty space on the panels, and it looks kind of desolate. So I jazzed it up with some rhinestones this guy at school gave me. It was actually pretty fun to assemble, but between that and applying the paint and decorating bit by bit, it took over a month to complete.”

If there was a way to look both bashful and fiercely proud at the same time, Chihiro had just pulled it off.

“Huh... GunPla sure have changed over the years,” Kaizu murmured, overwhelmed. Haruto was no less shocked.

“...I mean, Build Fighters *did* always say that when it comes to GunPla, there are no limits except your own imagination.”

“I’ve never seen such a... I don’t know. ‘*Girl Power*’ Neo Zeong?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen people decorate models like this, but never a Neo Zeong before. Between the size and the price, you can’t really buy another one if you mess it up... Even if you have the motivation, it must’ve been hard to commit to it.”

“Oh, did you apply weathering to it, too?”

“Whoa, he did...!”

“I’m not sure if you’re trying for realism or fairy-tale fanciness here!”

Chihiro grinned at Kaizu, clearly in his element. “Well, I’m trying to express the uncertainty of the world by taking something beautiful and deliberately damaging it a bit. See? Here, and here; these are two areas I focused on. I actually took apart a few of the rhinestones before applying the separate pieces. It looks all shiny at first glance, but look closer, and you can tell it’s been through a lot—that’s the theme of this piece. It’s hard to tell from the photo, but the Sinanju inside it is in even worse shape—I mostly painted it gray.”

“Wow, talk about a deep cut,” Kaizu said, grimly nodding.

“Do you have photos of your other models?”

“I do!”

Nodding at Haruto, Chihiro began swiping through his phone again. And thus, the party finally heated up—at least among the three men (ages seventeen, twenty-three, and thirty-seven) as they talked endlessly about Gundam models. Meanwhile, Ui smiled awkwardly, Aoba stared coldly at them, and Ashley enjoyed her drink without much regard for anything else.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What are Ui Aioi's favorite novels?



I love Haruto Fuwa's *Chevalier of the New World*, of course. I'm also generally a fan of the bigger-name web novels that made the leap to mainstream publishing, like *Mushoku Tensei*, *Overlord*, *Saihate no Paladin*, *So I'm a Spider, So What?*, and *Isekai Rakugo*. I also still like some of my more old-time favorites, like *Boogiepop* and *Kino's Journey*.

QUESTION

Can Ui Aioi give me her body measurements?



I-I'm keeping that under wraps! But if Fuwa *really* wants to know...

The Template Temptation

Apart from the male contingent hitting it off over robot model construction, nothing else of great note happened during the mixer. It ended about two hours after everyone arrived, their stomachs full of Italian food and drink. Haruto and Kaizu split the bill for everyone between them.

“Well,” Haruto said in front of the restaurant, “thanks for coming today! I’ll see you all around the publishing office, huh?”

“...Thank you,” Aoba said. The two hours together hadn’t improved her mood as she trotted off.

Chihiro watched her go. “I’ll join Kasamatsu on the way to the station. It’s getting late anyway,” he added before bowing and setting off after her.

“Wow, Chihiro’s a good-lookin’ guy, huh?” Kaizu may have sounded like he was making fun of him, but he wasn’t. He sighed. “...Aoba Kasamatsu, though... I don’t mind if someone’s aggressive like that, you know. Hungry. But if that’s how she’s acting before she’s sold a single book, that worries me... I can only guess she and her editor aren’t getting along, either.”

“...If you’re that worried,” Ashley countered, an ironic tone to her voice, “then why don’t you look after her?”

Kaizu chuckled. “That’s not my job, now, is it? Plus, if their relationship deteriorates to the point that she doesn’t even make her debut, that’s just fine by me.”

There was nothing ironic or joking about Kaizu’s tone. He seemed to be honestly hoping for that.

He turned back toward Ashley. “By the way, you wanna get another drink with me somewhere else?”

“Mmm...?!” Haruto reared back, visibly surprised, and scrutinized Kaizu’s face.

“All right,” Ashley casually responded.

“Wha...?!” Haruto’s eyes darted between them a few times.

“Well, thanks for tonight, Fuwa.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Let’s meet up again soon, Haruto.”

The two of them walked off together, leaving a dumbfounded Haruto behind.

“Uh... What...?”

A few seconds was all it took to plunge him into turmoil. They’d barely even exchanged any words in the bar. What was it that made them so naturally pair off and walk the city streets at night?

“Didn’t they know each other before now?” Ui asked.

Haruto nodded. Then it clicked in his mind. “Ohhh, yeah, maybe...!”

But how did they know each other before? The most natural explanation was that he was a taxpayer client of hers, but that wouldn’t explain why he readily invited her out without any warning. They were both in their thirties, though. Were they actually an item before now...?

“Um, Fuwa?” Ui asked as Haruto’s mind raced over this.

“Y-yes?!”

“...What do you want to do now?”

“Well, um...”

Haruto failed to provide a coherent answer. Ui looked up at him.

“Because if you have some time, would you mind if we chat a bit?”

“A-all right.” Haruto nodded, swept away by the advancing wave.



The two of them stopped by a coffee shop on the way to the train station, sitting across from each other. Haruto eyed Ui carefully, heart racing. She seemed to be brooding over something, which made him feel even more nervous.

...She isn’t gonna say “I love you” right now, is she...?

If she did, he’d all but have to tell her no. But he knew how it felt to have one’s feelings denied like that—his own experience with that was still fresh. He didn’t want to put another girl through that same kind of pain. He knew by now that it not only hurt to be denied but to do the denying in the first place.

...In which case, it wouldn’t be for her sake at all. I’d just be trying to avoid more pain.

Sometimes, he knew, you had to lay your feelings bare if you wanted to move forward in life—but still, he hoped against hope she didn’t choose now to do it. He hoped with all his heart.

“Um, Fuwa?” she suddenly asked.

“Y-yes?” he replied, voice wooden.

After a couple of false starts, Ui finally said it:

“...Is writing to a template that bad of a thing?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t—um? T-to a template?”

He was already reflexively offering an apology before he parsed the question.

“Remember what Aoba said at the bar?” she pensively continued. “Like, ‘unlike your typical template otherworld fantasy’ and so on. I used to do the same thing, until I went to your lecture at school. I used to pick on other series for using the same template, over and over.”

“Oh... Right.”

Haruto recalled what she’d said at the class and smiled.

A template, of course, is a standard style or format one could use to create perfect copies of the same thing repeatedly. In the creative world, it was a teasing way to refer to characters or story developments that were all but copied from other works.

“But once you yelled at me,” Ui continued, “I realized I made fun of things like otherworld fantasies and super-powered battle series without ever really reading them. So I did. I read a lot of them. And once I did, I saw a lot of books in the same genre really do share a lot of the same elements.”

“...Oh? For example?”

“...Well, like how a proud, determined girl with red hair appears as a main character, or how the hero winds up dueling a famously powerful student on the first day of his new school, or how he fights with a sword, or how he traces his lineage back to some kind of important family, or how there’s battle tournaments and this mysterious enemy appears in the middle of them, and also how titles use a lot of complex terms no one understands unless you leave a note in the ruby.”

“Sounds a lot like *Chevalier of the New World*.”

“Yes,” she replied as Haruto giggled. “And those elements do appear enough that you could call them a template. But when I read the books to the end, or went on to Volume 2 or 3, I realized the only things these series had in common were just a very small handful of elements behind their framework.”

“...”

Haruto remained silent but kept a small smile on his face as Ui continued.

“For example, maybe the hero comes from some fancy lineage, but the full backstory can be totally different between series. Maybe he underwent special training from a young age; maybe he was raised without knowing his lineage; maybe there’s literally some kind of power in his blood; maybe he has a particularly unique sister or parent; maybe he grew up loved; maybe he didn’t. And an enemy jumping into a tournament midway? Maybe his identity’s revealed;

maybe it's not; maybe he's actually a robot or a monster; maybe he's human; maybe the hero beats him; maybe he doesn't. The same element can be depicted in a ton of different ways by different series. And maybe they're part of the same abstract category, but I don't think you can really say they're all the same just because of that."

"...Right, right."

"That's most obvious with all the 'hero gets reincarnated or summoned to another world' novels on the Web. The heroes live in all kinds of different ways after that summon or reincarnation. People accused those novels of being immature power trips starring invincible protagonists, but—at least with the series that have lasted a while or made the jump to print novels—no matter how invincible the hero is at first, he's always going to run into someone equal to or better than him. Even if he's still got the most power in the universe, he'll face challenges in dealing with the world and its people in one way or the other, and every series depicts him solving those challenges in a different way. Lately, you're seeing more variety, like people getting reincarnated as spiders or vending machines or trucks, and some popular series like *Konosuba* and *Atelier Tanaka* are tweaking the formula for laughs, too. There's this 'template' of people going into other worlds with their past memories or other 'cheat' abilities, and thanks to that, writers are asking, 'What happens next?' and using that as a starting point to take their own paths. The fact we have so many books that share a common set of rules that we call it a 'template' is the whole reason we can have parodies of that, or series that turn it on its head. The existence of templates is a sign of a mature genre, and I don't think you can dismiss entire genres out of hand like I did."

Ui took a few short breaths after finishing her tirade. Haruto gave her a short round of applause, which made her blush a little.

"...I'm sorry, Fuwa. I didn't mean to ramble quite so much..."

Haruto smiled. "I can tell you've studied a lot of series, Aioi, and not just your personal favorites, either. I don't think you're the kind of person who'd throw around terms like 'the good old days of light novels' without thinking about it."

"Oh, don't bring *that* up again," Ui replied, visibly embarrassed.

"Ha-ha! Well, I mean, about *your* series... You know, *I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World*, so *I Just Started a Harem*?"

"Y-yes?"

"That didn't get picked for the grand prize just because you studied the trends and produced a really good summary of them."

"Huh?"

"It wasn't some kind of cheap magic trick you pulled off. Me, Kaizu, and the editor in chief all agreed that here was someone who really liked what they were writing. That's what convinced us to make

the pick. And you do love the otherworld tropes, don't you?"

"...Yes," Ui said, a bit reluctantly. "...Not always, though. I made fun of them without reading them. Even when you compelled me to start studying them, at first I was just like, 'These are all the same.' But once I started honestly appraising each series, I realized each was different in its own way, and it turned me on to how deep this genre could be...and I guess I started really enjoying it. That's why I wanted to write in it."

Haruto nodded sagely. "I get that. It was the same way with me and *Chevalier*."

When he began to write that, the chief trends in light novels were harems and battle-centric series. He purchased several for research, and somewhere along the line, he got addicted. He fell in love with the whole subject. So he dove in. And maybe there were true-blue craftspeople in the world who could write a book 100 percent based on their own skill, with no passion involved—but Haruto could never do that.

"Back when I was still just a light novel reader and not a writer," he continued, "whenever you saw a ton of books in the same genre come out at the same time, I'd be like, 'Why are all these people writing the same thing at once? Are they all that hard up for money?' But that's not it. I mean, sure, there are industry reasons for jumping on the bandwagon—it makes it easier for editors to say yes, since they know they can sell at least X number of copies. But the real reason is simpler. I think it's just, you know, they want to write it. If you read a book that was great enough to launch its own trend, you start wanting to try to make your own. Like, you want to test out this plot point, or you think you can pull people in better than this other guy. You can't help it."



"I definitely hear you...!" Ui nodded.

"...And maybe I'm looking through rose-colored glasses a little, but I really don't think there's such thing as a 'template' novel. Even if you borrowed a plot wholesale from somewhere else, unless you're just copy-pasting and changing only the proper nouns, I think the author's own will is going to creep into it. If the feeling behind the work is different, the product's going to be a separate thing, too."

"Yes... I agree with you." Ui seemed to be taking it to heart. But her expression was clouded.

"...What's up?"

"Well, Fuwa, you and I know otherworld fantasy can vary wildly depending on the series, and you can see that for yourself when you read them. But most readers just aren't like that."

"Right..." Haruto had to nod at this.

"And I'm scared," she continued, visibly concerned. "Because I personally believe that my work is the only one of its kind in the whole world, but to the masses, I'm sure it's just going to look like something off a template. Even if someone reads it to the end, I'm bracing to hear them say, 'That was a really good riff on the template.' Just like I used to be, and I guess just like how Aoba is now. This story I love and cherish is going to be dismissed by so many people as just another rehash, and that really scares me."

"....."

Haruto fell silent. This fear on Ui's part was something Haruto himself had felt in the past, something that gradually diminished as he kept producing books. But the anime version brought in all these people who'd never read the novels and only knew the title and basic plotline, and that made the fear fresh in his mind all over again. There were so many out there who looked at a template-ish series and used that as a reason to trash it without even reading page one.

Saying all otherworld fantasies are the same was really ignorant. It was like stating, 'All mysteries are the same, because they have these weird crimes taking place,' or 'All sci-fi is the same, because it has all this advanced technology,' or 'All novels set in schools are the same, because they're set in schools.'" But Haruto had no way of taking this ignorance—brought about by a lack of understanding, critical thought, and (most of all) interest—and enlightening the detractors, and he doubted anyone else in the industry did, either.

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea how to get rid of that fear."

"No...?"

Ui looked disappointed. She probably wanted to discuss this more than anything today.

"...But I think it's the job of each author to face up to it. A lot of

them get used to it as they keep producing stories. A lot of them change their writing style so it's hard to say they're working with a template. I'm sure some of them even go after their critics on the Net or in their series. And...I know some of them leave when they can't take it anymore."

"What about you, Fuwa?"

"I...don't know." He chuckled. "It's hard to say. I thought I had come to terms with it a while ago, but when I see a bunch of anime-only people trashing me, it makes me want to freak out."

"You too, huh?"

Ui smiled at him a little tearfully—the vague sort of expression Boogiepop makes all the time.



As they walked toward the station, Ui stopped and bowed to Haruto.

"Thanks for everything today, Fuwa. It's only a month until my first book is published...and now I feel like I'm ready to be on the same stage as you."

"...Oh?" He smiled a bit. "Well, there's no need to be so formal about it."

Ui froze. "Huh?"

"You've studied a lot. You've worked hard. You've thought, and worried over, the same things as me. We've been sharing the stage for a while now. I'm not above you or anything."

"...Well, what should I call you, then?" Ui asked.

"Anything is fine."

She thought for a moment. Then:

"All right... Haruto."

It was a simple shift, but it came as an epoch-making event to Haruto. Being called by his first name, in *this* kind of scenario, by a woman—that hadn't happened since high school. It was a completely normal thing to call him, but there was this oddly sweet echo to it in his ears. He never noticed it until now. He wondered if Itsuki felt that way with how Nayuta talked to him, and it made him jealous.

"...Is that all right?"

"Oh, sure! Totally! Please!"

Ui smiled at the reddened Haruto, then bowed again. "In that case, Haruto, thank you. I know I still have a lot to learn from you."

"Sure. Me too," he replied, unable to keep his heart from racing.

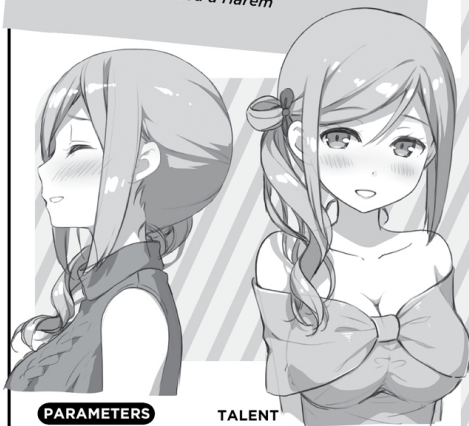
UI AIOI

AGE: 23

BORN: August 5

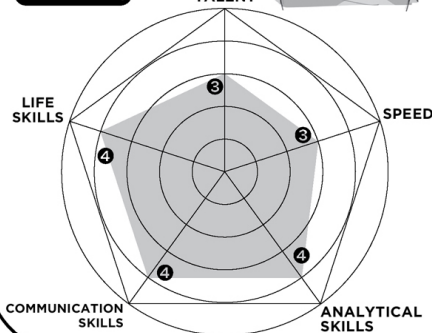
A rookie novelist who won the grand prize in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

Novels: I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, so I Just Started a Harem



PARAMETERS

TALENT



**A HEAVY-DUTY PHENOM
WITH PASSION IN HER
(WELL-ENDOWED) CHEST**

The Last Cry in Hades

As Haruto and Ui walked back from the café, Makina Kaizu and Ashley Ono were relaxing at a bar not far from Ashley's accounting office. They were seated on two adjacent bar stools, Kaizu nursing a whiskey and Ashley enjoying some sake.

"...I wasn't expecting *you* there, Makina." She gave a small sigh, sipping her Juyondai. She was a regular here—it was the kind of small, slightly hip place you'd see in a Haruki Murakami novel, but it also boasted an appreciable sake collection. The manager knew her, so she didn't have to show ID to drink anymore.

"...Neither was I," Kaizu said with a grin. He was tackling a Chivas Regal Mizunara edition on the rocks. If you sample just a bit of it on your tongue, the spicy aroma and soft sweetness—something blended for the Japanese market—spread out over the inside of your mouth. Kaizu almost never drank, not even at parties, but he wasn't about to hit a bar with a woman and just have a soda.

"You know," he moaned, "that was supposed to be my big chance to get to know that new writer with the tits. You wrecked my chances."

Ashley gave him a sarcastic smile. "Oh? Was *that* who you were after? You'd normally never have the guts to go to a mixer like that if I wasn't around."

"...That's not trueue." He reproachfully groaned. "You gunning for Fuwa?"

"....."

She turned away from him. Kaizu sighed.

"...He's handsome, he's a good guy, and he's got money, but he's not used to women at all. He's way too good a catch to have an old biddy like you toying with him. Give him a break."

Ashley glared back at him, unimpressed. "You're calling *me* old...? Chihiro was treating you like a retiree."

"We're both old and decrepit in his eyes. We've lived twice as long as him."

"Hey, he's seventeen and I'm thirty-three. That's not twice as long."

"It's close enough."

Then Ashley raised her eyebrows. “Come to think of it, Chihiro *did* ask me once if I ever got served whale meat in my school lunches...”

“Yeah, see? That’s not much different from the age of gluing Gundam model parts together.”

Ashley, unable to fire back, finished her cup of sake and took one of the pieces of pickled daikon radish topped with cream cheese from the plate between them. Kaizu followed her lead, chasing the crunchy pickle with a quick lap of whiskey. This was a pretty simple appetizer, a specialty of Akita Prefecture up in northern Japan; more of a snack than a prepared “dish,” but it worked well with both types of alcohol.

Cream cheese and sake are a surprisingly good match, while the smoky taste of the daikon compliments a good whiskey just fine. Sake matches well with anything pickled, of course, and cream cheese has long been known as a go-to with whiskey—so putting them together, and combining those two sour flavors, creates an exquisite harmony. The crunch of the radish adds a nice accent as well, making it the perfect snack no matter what your poison is.

“Pheww,” breathed Ashley as she emptied her cup. “Time is a cruel mistress, isn’t she? Chihiro is so smart, but even *he* thinks everything that happened before he was born is all part of some nebulous ‘past.’”

“...Yeah,” Kaizu muttered, looking at the ice floating in his glass. “...Three years, though, huh?”

“...Yeah.” Ashley nodded.



Makina Kaizu and Ashley Ono first met about seven years earlier, via a mutual friend. The three of them drank together at this bar regularly. They *last* met around three years ago—at that mutual friend’s funeral. Since their relationship was entirely through this third woman, and since Kaizu was too mistrustful of people to let someone else do his taxes for him, they had no reason to see each other again.

This mutual friend’s pen name was Kasuka Sekigahara. She was a novelist who won the Grand Prize in the 1st GF Bunko New Writers Contest, the same one that Kaizu was a runner-up in. Kaizu was twenty-three then, Kasuka nineteen. She came to know Ashley because Ashley had just opened her office, and Kasuka happened to live nearby and needed some tax help. Being a pair of single self-employed women, they soon hit it off well enough to hang out together, and Kasuka’s references gave Ashley a stable of writers, manga artists, illustrators, and other publishing-industry types to accept work from.

It wasn't long before she developed a reputation as a specialist in the field.



Kasuka Sekigahara was just a bit under five feet tall, slim and compact. She was more cute than beautiful and had an intimidating neutral expression, making her seem colder than she intended. Her standout feature was her waist-length black hair—and the darker gothic-Lolita clothing she liked.

The novel she submitted to the contest—her first work, she said—received rave reviews. Her second and third were just as good, and she truly deserved to be called a “genius” in her field. But unlike Nayuta Kani, who later won the same prize mainly by portraying the world she felt inside her, Kasuka was more the “entertainer” type who wanted to move people with her work—a rarity among geniuses.

Along those lines, she had a passion for analyzing and researching trends, but this didn't mean she had much of a normal social life. When the die were rolled to create her character, all her points were put into novel-writing parameters—many geniuses could be considered outliers in various facets of their lives, and she was no exception. This led her to often talk and act in eccentric ways.

For example, around two years after her debut, Kasuka stormed into the apartment Kaizu lived in alone and announced:

“Makina, time for sex!”

“Wh-what are you talking about?!” Kaizu blushed in a bit of a panic as Kasuka boldly stood before him.

“I want to write a really sexy scene that'll make all the readers get super horny, but sadly, I'm a virgin. So I want to try it out.”

“...Why me?”

“Cause I wouldn't mind doing it with you. You're the best male friend I have.”

Kaizu had mixed feelings about how offhand her reply was. At the time, he had a major hang-up about how much less talented he was than Kasuka. Her debut novel was a long-term success, enjoying multiple reprints, while Kaizu's debut series never found its footing and got canceled after three volumes—and even the readers who bought it didn't exactly heap him with praise.

Kasuka's own debut series could've aimed for an anime adaptation if things had kept going, but she wrapped it up at Volume 4. The reason: “Because I've come up with a better idea.”

Meanwhile, after several proposals and rejections, Kaizu debuted his next series—and before he'd even finished writing his current

volume, it was already slated for cancellation at Volume 3.

And Kasuka's second series hit it big again. The readers agreed with her—the second series was better than the first one.

So here was Kaizu, who wanted a running series but couldn't make one stick, and there was Kasuka, who ended a hit series even though there was zero guarantee her next one would sell. A man who couldn't catch a break, and a woman who didn't know failure. They had both debuted only two years earlier, but the difference between them couldn't have been more evident. Not that those two years were even necessary to see it.

Kasuka had innocently called him her "best male friend," but Kaizu could all but see the mental partition dividing them. If this was a novel, Kasuka would be the main protagonist, and he'd be a side character. He wouldn't even be her foil, much less some kind of writing rival. Just a face in the crowd—or on the stage when they both won that award.

...But Kaizu, at this younger point in his life, hadn't yet acquired the wisdom to accept these things as a part of life.

"...I'm sorry, but I got a girlfriend."

Kasuka pouted at him. "Oh? Well, all right. I'll try someone else."

"Whoa whoa whoa! Who else would you go to?!"

"Mmm, I was thinking my editor."

This editor was a guy named Satoshi Godo. He worked with Kaizu as well—supposedly in his early thirties but grizzled, chiseled, and looking every bit like a yakuza gangster. Kasuka, meanwhile, was a petite girl who looked younger than she was—high school, for sure.

Kaizu imagined the duo together—and instantly saw the dangers. Sure, Godo was a sensible man despite appearances. Kaizu doubted he'd ever entertain her stupid offer. But when he turned her down, Kasuka would doubtlessly find some other hoodlum instead, and that'd be even worse.

"...Ugh, all *right*! Geez!"

And so Kaizu and Kasuka shared a bed just once. It was interrupted several times with requests like "Hang on, let me take some pictures" and "Can you move your leg? I want a good look at what's going on there" and so forth. It put the "*unnngghh*" in "unsatisfying."

And then his girlfriend, whom he had dated since college, found out. It was all downhill from there.



Ashley Ono was often just as thrown by Kasuka's eccentricities. For

example, about half a year after they came to know each other, Kasuka had asked out of nowhere:

“Ashley, do you want to be a couple?”

“A... A couple? Oh, Kasuka, are you—? Did you, uh, did you have a thing for me for a long time, or...?”

“No, no, I’m not into girls.”

Ashley frowned at this abject denial. “So...what do you mean?”

“I’m thinking about writing an erotic novel starring a lesbian couple, so I need to do some research.”

“Ohhh, I see...”

That came as a relief. It wasn’t Ashley’s orientation, either. But it *did* give her reason to think. After losing two serious relationships with men, she was pretty pessimistic about love in general. If this was just kind of a playful pretend thing, it might help her heal a bit, perhaps.

So she gave Kasuka the okay without thinking too deeply about it, but:

“Okay, so I want you to call me ‘Mistress’ from now on.”

“Huh?”

“I’m picturing a couple in an all-girls school. One of them’s older than the other, and she has the younger girl call her Mistress.”

“...All right, uh...Mistress. Does that work?”

It was, to be frank, embarrassing enough to give Ashley a heart attack.

Outside of that, however, being ersatz lovers with Kasuka was a lot more comfortable than she’d thought it’d be. She got used to the “Mistress” thing pretty quickly; Kasuka lived with her at her office, and Ashley cooked for her, held hands, went on dates—the whole bit. They shared similar tastes in fashion and had broadly similar bodies, so they also knew each other’s erogenous zones.

Maybe...it wouldn’t be so bad to live with her for good.

This kind of domestic pseudo-lesbian lifestyle had proven addictive for Ashley. But it ended abruptly.

“All right, I guess it’s about time we split up.”

Kasuka’s girls’ love novel was another great success for her, even capturing readers who knew nothing of the genre, but as always, she wrapped up the series in Volume 4. On the day she finished the manuscript for that volume, she went up to Ashley and announced she was ending things.

“Is—is there any need to split up just because the series is done?” Ashley asked, panicking and pleading with her to change her mind. “It’s been a lot of fun, and...um, didn’t it feel good, what we just did, Mistress?”

The naked Kasuka gave her a childish smile. “Yeah. It’s been fun,

and that *was* good. You've helped me make a lot of readers happy. But I'm satisfied now."

It was Kasuka's many readers versus the temporary lover cultivated for the sake of a novel for those readers. In Kasuka's mind, it was clear which was more important.

So they split up and went back to being friends. For Ashley, their relationship was one of the happiest times of her life, but also a period she didn't want anybody else to know about. The "Mistress" part in particular she wished she could take back, but this was right when she came to know Kaizu. This new, unknown friend of Kasuka's got her so jealous that whenever the three of them were together, Ashley stuck to her like glue, calling her "Mistress, Mistress" to no end.



Once they split up, Ashley stopped cooking completely and slacked off on the other household chores as well. That was the beginning of her generally sloppy habits. The only thing she kept from that era with Kasuka was the girlish canopy double bed in the bedroom, believing it would be a waste to dispose of it.



One of Kasuka Sekigahara's greatest hits was a series called *A Sister's All You Need!* It became one in part because it came at the pinnacle of her writing talents but mostly because it was the first of her series to make it to Volume 5 and beyond. When you're a light novelist, having a *continuing* series is your lifeline, because every new volume means new orders for the previous ones and more chances to catch readers' eyes, securing sales across all the novels.

When your work's under consideration for an anime or other types of media, whether the series is ongoing or not is a major factor toward receiving a nod. A "media mix" strategy like this is usually focused on not just the anime or manga alone, but on energizing sales across the whole franchise. No matter how much of a hit the series is, if it's already been finished and there's no future shot in the arm to give the franchise, there's not much upside to deploying across multiple media (with some exceptions, of course). This was why Kasuka, despite her consistent string of hits, had never seen an anime adaptation of her work.

A Sister's All You Need! featured a teenage boy and the little sister who secretly saw him as a love interest. The series also featured a large cast of supporting characters, and that naturally meant a lot more content to work with. And the moment Kasuka confided to her editor Godo that she'd "probably need at least until Volume 10 to reach the conclusion," he immediately launched a multimedia campaign. In shockingly quick time, an anime, video game, and comic version were approved. And while Kasuka's schedule ballooned between her writing obligations and involvement in the game and anime, Kaizu had continued to toil away at his writing, dreaming of catching up to Kasuka someday—and now he was a stable, mid-tier novelist.

While all this was happening, Kaizu and Kasuka ran into each other at the editorial office and had a few drinks at a Belgian beer bar, enjoying small talk over mussels in wine sauce. Kasuka was a fan of imported beer, often giving him recommendations.

"...Have you lost weight, Kasuka?"

Kasuka looked a bit surprised at the question, then looked down at her chest. "You think so? Oh great... If I get any smaller, I'm gonna turn into Ashley..."

"That's kind of rude to her," Kaizu said with a laugh.

"But... Yeah, I've been super busy lately, so I've just been kind of eating whatever's handy... Maybe I am a little slimmer." She smiled her childish, fetching smile. "But I'm having so much fun right now! Once the series airs on TV, there's going to be millions of people looking at my work, you know? All those people enjoying my stuff... I can't wait for the anime to begin!"

"....."

Kaizu considered grouching about how great it must be to actually have a demand for one's work, but her eyes were sparkling with so much pure, innocent hope that he couldn't.

"Speaking of fun," she continued, "I had something neat happen today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, one of the contest entries is this really crazy piece. It's called *The Sister Apocalypse*, and I can't even begin to describe it."

As one of GF Bunko's biggest stars, Kasuka Sekigahara had naturally been obliged to join the New Writers Contest judging panel the past few years.

"It's rare for you to give praise like that, Kasuka," said Kaizu. He was right. Kasuka kept up with recent hit releases for research purposes, but for the most part, her reaction was "I can write better than this" (and she was usually right, which was the painful part). Even with Kaizu's work, her summation was "I like you, Makina, but your writing is just boring." She took a similarly no-holds-barred approach to her contest evaluations and notes to the writer.

"Praise?" Kasuka replied, curious. "I'm not praising it. There's a ton of issues with it. It's just this long masturbatory essay, really. But there's this inscrutable kind of force behind it. I'm thinking the author is either a true genius or a total f—k. I'd love to see him debut and mature, either way. If he does, hopefully I can write him a praise quote or two for the ads."



That new author, Itsuki Hashima, ran into Kasuka at the after-party for the 10th GF Bunko New Writers Contest. She and Kaizu were chatting over beers when Godo, now editor in chief, and another editor brought him in—this kid, in his collared school uniform, the innocence of youth still left on his face. He wore a red ribbon on his

chest, indicating he was a prizewinner, and on it was his name.

“Hashima,” Godo said, “this is Kasuka Sekigahara.”

“Um, nice to meet you! It’s an honor!”

Itsuki’s eyes shone, overpowering his nervousness as he met the novelist he adored. He bowed, his voice cracking as he spoke.

“...Oh. Hashima?” Godo, stifling a laugh (which only made him look more threatening), tried to get Itsuki’s attention. “That’s Makina Kaizu. Ms. Sekigahara is right here.”

“Huhhh?!”

Itsuki froze in his bow, face turning red. He had bowed to the wrong person—and when he looked up at their respective name tags, he turned pale.



“I, I, I, I, I apologize!!” He scrutinized Kasuka’s face. “I—I didn’t know you were a woman, Ms. Sekigahara!!”

Kasuka just laughed, not showing any offense. Her age and gender weren’t revealed to the public, and she enjoyed seeing people’s reactions when they first met her. Itsuki’s ranked pretty high on her list.

“Ha-ha-ha! Are you surprised?”

“Um, uh, thank you so much for accepting my novel! I’m a *huge* fan of *A Sister’s All You Need!* I wanted to be a novelist because I looked up to you! I watched every episode of the anime multiple times! It’s so good! I love it!”

Kasuka proudly wrinkled her nose at this torrent of praise. “Oh, do you? Well, I’m glad you know good content when you see it!”

“Sekigahara,” Godo interrupted, “do you mind if I introduce someone else?”

“Mm? Oh. Sure.”

A man in a business suit stepped up. He had come here with Itsuki, and Godo and Kasuka knew him. It was Kenjiro Toki, a college student who had worked part-time at editorial the past two years. He did excellent work, and Godo took him under his wing and got him involved with editing. He was an editor in all but name by now.

“Kenjiro Toki here’s officially been hired on by our company. He’ll be part of the GF editorial team starting this April. I’m officially Hashima’s editor at the moment, but I’m gonna have KenKen handle the revisions for this round of winners.”

“I hope you’ll keep giving me your support, Mr. Kaizu and Ms. Sekigahara!”

Kasuka smiled at the serious-minded Toki as he bowed. “You finally made it, huh, KenKen? Congratulations. But you’re still in school, huh? I thought you were full-time at GF long ago.”

“N-no, uh, I still have a lot to learn...”

“Oh, don’t be so modest,” she said as she patted his shoulder.

Kaizu sighed. “Well, you’re graduating soon. And Hashima here... Are you in high school?”

“My first year, sir!”

“Your first year... You’re basically a kid... The idea of all these young, talented people pouring into the industry is so distressing... It may be about time to pack it up...”

He played it off as a joke, even if it was about three-fifths true. Kasuka gave it a belly laugh.

“What are you talking about, Makina?! We’re still just getting started!”

“Maybe *you* are,” he replied with a grin.

...But that was the last night he saw her honestly happy.



Itsuki Hashima's blanket praise for the *Sister's All You Need!* anime was no fluke. After debuting in October, the series became a proven sensation—high-quality direction, a well-adapted script, expert production, a passionate performance from a proven voice cast, and music that energized the whole thing. It ended with a bang after twelve episodes, and the disc sets flew off store shelves.

The novel series was already GF Bunko's best-selling franchise, but the anime tripled their sales figures, putting it in the top echelon of the entire light novel industry. No matter how you sliced it, the anime was a great success.

...Perhaps *too* much of one.

Sales of the *Sister's All You Need!* novels might have tripled, but far more than three times the number of people kept tabs on the brand. And the more well-known a series becomes, the heavier the backlash for it and its creator.

Whenever a new volume was released, spoilers would immediately spread across the Internet, popping up on your Twitter timeline when you least expected it. This meant even people who had never heard of the series before were familiar with the beats of the plot. Since her debut, Kasuka had never hesitated to play with font sizes, typography, and emoticons in her work; now, pages of particularly egregious examples of this were getting scanned and posted online, added to image sites with tags like "Why I stopped reading light novels lmao."

To Kasuka, who strove constantly to make her work that little bit more interesting and affect the emotions of her readers, it was like seeing her own child being tortured in broad daylight. It hurt. It felt as if her soul was being passed around and mercilessly abused. But Kasuka Sekigahara kept writing. She didn't reveal her feelings to Kaizu, other writers, her editor, or any of the people involved with the myriad adaptations of her work—in fact, she acted brighter and more carefree than ever.

Only with Ashley Ono, her sole friend outside the business, could she honestly reveal her weaker side.

"...You look exhausted."

"Yeah... It's been a slog."

They were at their usual bar, Ashley with some sake, Kasuka with a sugary cocktail.

"...I guess even a bestseller like you can get hurt by the comment

section, huh? I'm honestly a little surprised."

"Of course I can." Kasuka weakly smiled. "Nobody can hear cruel words meant to hurt them and not get negatively affected by it. And I'm a novelist—this whole job's based on the assumption that words have real meaning and power."

"I see," Ashley murmured. "But you kinda dish it out, too, don't you? Which series was it? One of the ones that placed in the contest. When I read your comments, I felt a little bad for the author."

Kasuka scowled, but she looked a bit guilty. "...That was probably *Chevalier of the New World*. That was... Like, the one I read just before that was so off-the-wall and entertaining, but *this* was so textbook and calculated. It snuffed out all the enthusiasm from before...but I kind of regret doing that now."

Ashley smiled sympathetically. She could tell Kasuka meant it.

"Right? Because I wouldn't have blamed the guy if he sucker-punched you at the after-party."

"Yeah... I *did* meet him there, actually. Nice guy. And hot. He even thanked me for the criticism and everything, and he sounded sincere. I don't know what he thought of me on the inside, but I think he's gonna have a career."

"Hmm...?" Ashley mused. "Well, if you're going to vilify someone, as they say, it's at least kinder if they get a chance to fire back."

Kasuka's expression clouded again.

"It's totally mean for someone to throw stones at you from a safe zone you can't reach them from...but can't you just chalk that up as the 'tax' for being famous?"

"Ashley..."

When Ashley saw the profound sadness in her eyes, she immediately regretted saying it. "...Sorry. That's the business side of me talking. Forget about it. Nobody should be allowed to take a tax from you that doesn't exist in modern society."

"Totally. If someone wanted me to pay a 'famous' tax, they better lawyer up first."

Ashley laughed. "And if they're gonna enact that, they should put up an 'anonymous' tax, for people who use *that* as a shield to do anything they want. It'd be unfair otherwise."

Kasuka laughed back. "That's a great idea. I guess this is why you're the accountant."

"...But that's how the Internet works. It's biased against people like you. At the very least, shouldn't you stop looking at it for now?"

"I know that's the smart thing to do, but..." She smiled lightly. "But all my dear, dear readers, the people who love my work... I see what they write in the surveys, and in the physical mail they send me. They all say things like, 'No matter what they say on the Net, I love

your books,’ or ‘Don’t let the Internet get you down, Sekigahara,’ and so on. You know? I can’t turn away from the world my own readers are looking at. I have to see what kind of crap’s being said about me... or else...I can’t fight it.”

The fierce will behind those words left Ashley with nothing to say. Kasuka wanted to fight—fight a foe as vague and undefined as it was enormous.

“...Well, I’m not a writer, so I can’t *really* understand how you feel. I can’t fight with you...but I’m always willing to have a drink with you. Besides, I have a lot of free time now that I’m single again.”

“...Thanks, Ashley.”

Ashley’s cheeks flushed a bit at Kasuka’s smile. And that night, for the first time in a while, they slept together.



Kaizu and Kasuka didn’t see Itsuki again until the after-party for the 11th GF Bunko New Writers Contest a year later.

“Um, Ms. Sekigahara... Things going okay? Um...with stuff?”

Even Itsuki knew about the remarkably obstinate online hate campaign against *A Sister’s All You Need!* This was his attempt at expressing his concern, but Kasuka greeted it with a smile.

“Ha-ha! Ah, that’s just the howling of a mob that’ll never do anything with their lives. Worrying about them is a waste of my time.”

“Y-yeah, true,” Itsuki replied, relieved.

“But, hey, Itsuki, your new series is doing pretty well, isn’t it?”

“It—it is! Thank you!”

Genesis Sisters of the New World, Itsuki Hashima’s first series following his debut publication, was turning into a decent hit, in no small part thanks to the power of ace illustrator Puriketsu.

“Now you’re part of the elites, huh?” Kasuka earnestly whispered, squinting at him. “Itsuki... Stay happy.”

“Um... Happy?”

“Successful authors have to stay happy,” she began, looking off into space. “You may think you’re successful, but then people who aren’t even your readers treat you like a sandbag—they throw stones at you, and you’re not allowed to fight back. The pressure breaks people’s hearts. It makes them disappear—and there’s no future for the job like that. Who would ever want to join an industry where you can’t be happy if you struggle for years and finally reach the top of the mountain? Who would want to work hard to achieve that? So that’s your job—to be happy. You can buy a house, or a fancy car, or loud

clothes. You can eat five-star meals and drink premium wine. You can marry a famous voice actress. You can let fans fawn over you at events or autograph sessions. You can act like a ‘man of culture’ in interviews and lectures. And you can even try mouthing off at your editor, although that’s too risky for me to recommend. Maybe you could even stop working and just screw around for a while. As long as you’re happy, then no matter how vulgar your desires, feel free to pursue them. No matter who you are—writer, artist, singer, actor, athlete—anyone who’s *already made it* to the top needs to stay happy for those following behind them. That’s their job.”

“.....”

Itsuki obediently listened to the whole speech. When she was done, Kasuka smiled broadly at him.

“What I’m saying is, don’t let anything break your heart. I’ve got high hopes for you, kid.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

She tousled his hair like a doting mother, her smile turning childlike.

And it was on the way home from that event that she collapsed, coughing up blood.



The next evening, Kaizu and Ashley came to the hospital to visit Kasuka, only to find her writing on a laptop she had brought in. The sight of a surprisingly healthy-looking Kasuka relieved them both.

She smiled at them, an almost unnaturally calm smile, and said:

“Well, I guess I’m gonna die.”

It was terminal pancreatic cancer—and at best, Kasuka Sekigahara had a year left.



Volume 12 of *A Sister’s All You Need!* marked a major turning point for the series, in preparation for the final conclusion in Volume 13. The large cast of characters all began to move under their own motivations, leading to turbulent developments that could’ve ended in any number of ways. The heroines were lashing out against one

another, emotions on full display. The deeper, darker, more intense side of the story, heretofore hidden in the shadows of this so-far light, cutesy tale, thrust its way to the surface.

And this volume, written by Kasuka as she sat in a hospital bed, literally chipping away at her life to produce it, was greeted with more abuse than ever before.

“Who asked for it to get serious?”

“I have no idea what she’s trying to accomplish.”

“I don’t give a crap about the filler characters; just tell me which girl he’s gonna pick.”

“I burned my whole collection.”

“Here’s what you get when a talentless light novel author thinks she’s better than you.”

“I read the spoilers, and I was so disappointed I didn’t bother buying it.”

“I hope the author dies!”

She could see people collating lists of grievances, posting them on threads and allowing other people—not even readers—to ridicule the series. There had been serious elements to the story before, as far back as Volume 1, and a decent amount of readers who picked up on those elements—readers who loved the characters’ human qualities, even when they didn’t match with what they personally wanted from them—*did* offer praise to Volume 12: “I liked the surprising developments,” they said, and “I hope everyone turns out happy in the end.” But they were drowned out by the overwhelming amount of negative shouting.

“...It is getting me down. Hearing that they want me to die really hurts right now...”

For the first time, Kasuka revealed her weaker side to Kaizu during a hospital visit.

“Being an author is asking for hardship, isn’t it...? If you want to depict a world and the people in it, you need to be a thousand times more delicate and emotive than the average person. You need a heart soft enough to be hurt by the smallest of things. But at the same time, you need a mind thick as steel, capable of withstanding unfair hatred that barely qualifies as criticism and cruelty that’d break other people’s hearts.”

“You need a thin skin *and* a thick one... Sounds impossible.”

Kaizu gave her a pained smile. The sight of Kasuka connected to a machine by a bunch of tubes almost made him want to cry.

She looked out the window. “The more sincere you are to your stories, to society, to people, the more they slip away from you,” she weakly spat out, more for his benefit than for hers. “The more you swear to them that they’re not all a bunch of stupid pigs, the more they fire back that light novels are just a bunch of slop for the sty

anyway... I don't even know if these people are still human.”
And later that night, she lost consciousness for two weeks.



The 12th GF Bunko New Writers Contest was held in December that year—a bit later than usual, since the judging was delayed. Kaizu had quickly taken over Kasuka's seat at the judges' table earlier that year. Kasuka wasn't at the after-party, of course, but Itsuki was.

“Thanks for all your hard work, Kaizu.”

He was still in his school uniform. It'd be his last year in school, if Kaizu recalled correctly. He looked so young and inexperienced the first time they met, but now he looked and spoke like a seasoned author.

“Um, is Ms. Sekigahara doing all right?”

Within GF Bunko's editorial department, only the editor in chief and his assistant knew about Kasuka's condition. Among their author stable, the truth was known only by Kaizu and other people with close, personal connections to her.

“Mmm, well, I don't think she's quite a hundred percent, no...”

He was being vague. She was told she had a year left to live following last year's after-party, and they were now past that limit. She was slipping in and out of consciousness these days. She could pass away at any moment.

But Itsuki didn't know that.

“Well, I sure hope *Sister* Volume 13 comes out soon. Volume 12 was such a blockbuster; I can't wait to see what happens next.”

A Sister's All You Need! volumes had come out at a steady clip up to now, but despite Volume 13 being the announced final installment, there had been no word on it for ten months.

“...Kasuka would be glad to hear that,” Kaizu replied, playing it normal.

Itsuki smiled back. “Tell her I said so next time you see her, okay?”



The next day, Kaizu paid Kasuka a visit. She had just woken up, and when he came in, she turned her head on the pillow and smiled. Even talking looked painful, so Kaizu did the talking for her—about his life, about neat books he read, about the awards ceremony.

“I'm really not cut out for this judging stuff... All the winners

looked at me during the show like, ‘Man, who the hell is this old weirdo?’”

Kasuka silently laughed.

“...Oh, Hashima told me to tell you that Volume 12 was really awesome, so he’s really looking forward to Volume 13... And I am, too, of course.”

“...Oh? Well... Why don’t we let him read it?” She pointed an unsteady finger toward a drawer in the hospital room.

“...That drawer?”

Kasuka lightly nodded. Kaizu pulled it out, revealing her notebook PC and a USB drive.

“...The file for Volume 13 is on the flash drive.”

“Huh...?!”

“I haven’t shown editorial yet. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to have it published...but if there’s even one person who says he wants to read it, then I can’t hold it back...”

“Kasuka... You...”

Kasuka gave the bewildered Kaizu a mischievous smile.

“I love seeing you so surprised, Makina. I wish I could’ve seen it more.”



Revision work on Volume 13 began immediately after Kaizu delivered the flash drive to Satoshi Godo, and Kaizu himself pitched in on the effort.

Reading the unedited version was, to him, a punch in the stomach. The maelstrom of events in Volume 12 gave way to a far different atmosphere—a quiet retelling of events, with a literary tone, leading up to the final “graduation” phase of the story. There were a few livelier episodes, but they were wrapped up with a minimum of prose, making them seem somehow forlorn.

...At first, Kaizu reasoned Kasuka no longer had the emotional strength to write long sentences. He soon realized he was wrong. The text was basic, simple in structure, but there was no disorder to the words. Everything was clear and well thought out. If you were a reader who seriously tackled the first twelve volumes and built a clear image of all the characters in your mind, you could extract a heavy tome’s worth of information out of every short description offered. It was that sort of style.

“...Kasuka... Even after all that, you...”

Even after all that, you’re still trying to believe in your readers?

This concluding volume seemed likely to alienate most people to

an astonishing degree. It left a great deal of responsibility to its readers' emotions. But it should still come across. He hoped it did. *Please*. It was an earnest, almost tactless expression of emotion in literary form—true love in each page.

Even after all the infinite hate that scarred her soul, even after being plunged into the abyss of despair time and time again, she never stopped loving her readers. This would be Kasuka Sekigahara's final work, and also her final testament.

We need to carry it home. To the readers you love, and to the readers who love you.

Largely unable to move, Kasuka dictated corrections to be made while Godo and Kaizu updated the text onsite. The two of them took turns spending nights at the hospital, running into her room whenever she was awake and making whatever revisions they could before she slipped back out.

This continued for about a week. And when it was over, she fell asleep, looking relieved, and never woke up again—she passed three days later.

Thus, at the age of thirty-one, Kasuka Sekigahara, a novelist who loved humanity more than anyone else, closed the curtain on her life at 9:47 PM on December 24.



Her funeral was subdued, attended only by her family and a small handful of friends and relations. Among her friends, there were Kaizu, Ashley, and just a few others. Viewing Kasuka there, sleeping peacefully while surrounded by white flowers, Ashley audibly sobbed, wailing like a child, and everyone else was soon affected enough to do the same.

Kasuka.

Kaizu, standing next to her, turned his eyes toward Kasuka and spoke to her in his heart.

You always said a successful novelist has to be happy, that they need to show how happy they are to the people coming after them. But I'm not successful, and I'm not a genius like you. So I'll show those people something else instead.

Even if I'm talentless, even if I wasn't chosen by the times, even if I'm never the protagonist, I'm going to take care of myself. In heart and mind. And I'm gonna keep up my carefree existence in this business.

Even if I can't make an international hit, even if I can't create something genre-making and revolutionary, even if I can't craft a

masterpiece that changes people's lives, I'm going to keep with the trends and never look back for a moment. I'm going to keep writing novels you can enjoy as a time killer. I'm going to live life as an average novelist. I may not be tremendously happy, but I'll be happy enough. I'm going to keep showing those below me something you or other geniuses could never do—the sight of a guy without real money or talent living a life that's enough.

This world isn't some cruel, despotic hell where only a few of the chosen ones can ever be happy. I want to show them that our society is just like everyone else's—so don't be afraid of it. Don't lose your way. Don't let it hurt you.

So, for now:

“...Good night, Kasuka... You... You worked hard...!”

With a shaky voice, Kaizu said his goodbyes, large tears falling from his eyes. For Makina Kaizu, the long, endless battle he planned to stake his life on had just begun.



“...Three years, though, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

Kaizu and Ashley reflected on their time with Kasuka as they drank at the bar. It would, in fact, be almost three years since they lost her. Kaizu was still clinging on for dear life to this industry, and Ashley had gained many writer friends in her own business—including personal favorites Itsuki Hashima and Haruto Fuwa.

“Hey, Makina, are you free on the twenty-fourth this month?”

Kaizu gave her a serious look.

“...I'm sorry, Ashley,” he earnestly said. “I appreciate the thought, but I could never get it up thinking about you. I'm really sorry.”

“If you keep making jokes like that, I'm gonna chop that useless penis right off.”

Ashley looked up and gave Kaizu a swift kick in the shin.

“Oww!”

She sighed. “...I don't need a withered old guy like you, either. I was *talking* about visiting Kasuka's grave.”

“...Oh... Wanna go together?”

The twenty-fourth would be the anniversary of her death. Kaizu

and Ashley always visited the site on that day, but always separately, never making any particular plans to meet up. Since they here were now, they might as well go together.

They spent the next while talking about Kasuka—smiling, sometimes nearing the point of tears. The stories kept on coming. And for them, there would be no forgetting the girl who kept fighting the world until her final day—loving her story, loving her readers, loving the human race.

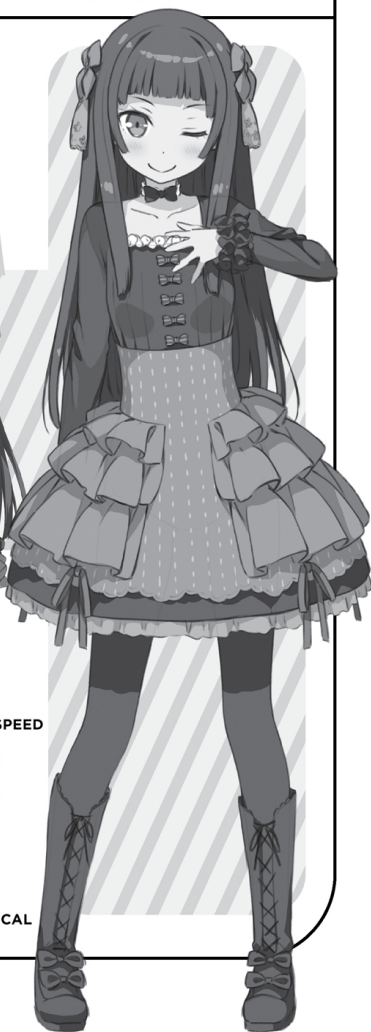
KASUKA SEKIGAHARA

AGE: 31

BORN: December 12

A genius novelist who put the GF Bunko label on the map.

Novels: *The Four-Person Triangle* (3 volumes), *Machine-aries in the Godless Realm* (4 volumes), *You Still Can't Smile* (3 volumes), *We Will Become Stardust Someday* (3 volumes), *Kasumi and Sheria* (4 volumes), *The Wizard Who Went All-In on Melee Stats* (2 volumes), *A Sister's All You Need!* (13 volumes), etc.



PARAMETERS

6 TALENT

LIFE
SKILLS

SPEED

COMMUNICATION
SKILLS

ANALYTICAL
SKILLS

**A FALLEN SUPERNOVA
WHOSE IMPACT AFFECTED
THE STORIES OF COUNTLESS LIVES**

Holy Night

Itsuki was not a fan of Christmas Eve. It was the date *that* woman—Kasumi Sekigahara, the novelist he respected more than any other, the one who inspired him to join this business—passed away.

He first learned about it at the end of December three years ago, after the funeral was held. She was having some health issues, he knew, but had no idea it was that bad. He had told Kaizu at the after-party that year to tell her he was looking forward to the final volume—how painfully *oblivious* of him! And Kaizu would've known her condition, too. What could he have been thinking when Itsuki said that...?

"Itsukiii, why're you looking so down?" Nayuta Kani, walking next to him, peered over.

"No, I'm...just a little tired."

That much was true. They were on a genuine Christmas date, something Itsuki thought was reserved for normies, but every site they thought about visiting was mobbed by couples just like them. He had totally underestimated the demand for romantic Christmas spots around the city. Itsuki was never very good around crowds in the first place, and the experience was mentally and physically punishing—even walking was a chore.

"...Let's just go eat dinner somewhere."

They ventured into a nearby restaurant. It was filled up with parties that had made reservations, and he deeply regretted not at least arranging *something* for dinnertime in advance. He was admittedly a beginner at love—not even a month of experience—but this was a terrible performance.

"...Well, we could always get fast food, at least..."

Nayuta pouted. "Aww... I don't want that. Not on Christmas Eve!"

"Neither do I, but what can we do...?"

"A lot, can't we?" Nayuta replied as if she had the perfect answer. "Or at least *one* thing. I know a place where we're guaranteed something good to eat."

"Oh, uh, really?"

Nayuta grinned back. "And that would be *Your! A! Part! Ment!* ☆"

"....."

“Isn’t your refrigerator packed with tons of Chihiro’s food? And knowing him, he probably went with a fancier holiday menu than usual!”

She was right. He knew Chihiro had stocked it last night with roast beef, beef stew, paella, slow-cooked chicken, and so on. Most run-of-the-mill restaurants couldn’t hold a candle to it.

Nayuta tugged at Itsuki’s arm. “Come onnnn, Itsukiiii, let’s go! Back to *your* place!”

“Uggh...”

He broke into a cold sweat.

...Between writing novel volumes and working on their respective media mix projects, they were both insanely busy—but Itsuki and Nayuta still found the time to date. Shopping, karaoke, movies, the aquarium, the zoo, a theme park—no matter where they went, going with Nayuta was incredible fun. Just being together was great.

Itsuki truly loved Nayuta. He did. Really. But ever since that night after her welcome-back party, where they shared that night in bed together, she hadn’t been back at his apartment. All their dates were outside, and they wrapped them up with dinner at some restaurant before splitting off at the train station. Nayuta would ask to visit his apartment, and Itsuki would always say no.

...That one night, when Nayuta transformed into a bloodthirsty beast of passion in his fold-out bed and grinded him into dust, was nothing short of traumatic to Itsuki. And deep down, in the bottom of his heart, he knew his feelings:

To hell with sex!

“Nyaaaa, Itsukiii, I’m hunnnngry...” Nayuta gave him a soft push, testing the limits of his sanity. “We’ll just eat, okay? We’ll just eat.”

“...You mean that?”

“Of course I do, Itsuki! Can’t you trust your girlfriend?”

“.....Mmmngh...”

He was in this whole predicament because he didn’t think to reserve a table. He couldn’t stand walking around any longer. Part of him *did* want to relax at home. So he finally gave in.

“.....Just dinner, all right?”

“Wheee!”

So they went back home. And then:

“*Sasekkusu!*”

The moment they stepped inside, Nayuta whipped all her clothes off.

“Remember how I said we’ll just eat? Well, that was a lie.”

“Goddammit! This is what I get for trusting a novelist!”

“Nyaaaaaa! ♥”

The naked Nayuta loomed over Itsuki’s body, her eyes more like a lion’s than a cat’s as they shone straight, her hands undoing his clothing.

“Hahh...hahh... Come on... What’s the big deal...?”

“St-stop, Kanikou...! I haven’t mentally prepared...!”

“Nya-ha-ha! That’s all right! I’ll do just the tip today! Just the tip, okay?”

“That is *such* a lie!”

The holy night of Christmas Eve was undoubtedly filled with death and disaster for many people in the world. Evil lurked around every dark corner, and still does.

But for now, at least—Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani were at peace.

(The End)



Bonus Track: A Sisterly Fairy Tale

This bonus track is a rewriting of the drama CD included with the deluxe edition of *A Sister's All You Need*, Volume 7 in Japan. Some of the dialogue has been edited and differs slightly from the original CD. Also note that this work remains a work of fiction and has no relation to any actual person or organization. Thank you.

1

It was another day at Itsuki Hashima's apartment spent gaming with Haruto, Nayuta, and Chihiro.

Their current choice was Catan, released in 1995: an epoch-making title that established Germany worldwide as a board-game juggernaut. Players compete to settle the fictional island of Catan, building roads and cities and developing their land. The player that reaches a prescribed number of victory points first wins.

"Two in a row!"

Haruto, the lord of Catan for two straight matches, let out a victorious war cry.

"Oh great, Prince Manwhore got me again," grumbled Nayuta.

"You're pretty good, Fuwa!" marveled Chihiro.

"Yeah, well, I've played a lot of Catan in my time. But you two sure put up a fight. If you got luckier with the dice, you totally could've staged a comeback."

It was a close battle, the kind anyone could have won. Except for Itsuki.

"Ugh! You hoarded everything for yourself, man! What are you, Kad*kawa?!"

Haruto snickered at the sore loser near him. "You suck at negotiating, Itsuki. Who is *ever* gonna trade their whole resource set for one brick?"

"Ngh..."

Building roads and cities in Catan requires five different resources—wood, brick, wheat, ore, and sheep. These are generated by the land you control, or you can also haggle with other players to trade for them.

"Why didn't you ever make *me* an offer?" questioned Nayuta. "I would've been willing to give you anything you asked for, *plus* some bonus sex."

"You just answered your own question," Itsuki replied dully.

"I see," Haruto said. "Kind of like someone who passes on purchasing a DVD special edition because he lives in his parents' house and already has too many X-rated body pillows and X-rated figures for the space he has, huh?"

"Oooh. That doesn't sound like the same thing, exactly, but it kind of does, too..."

"Yeah, there are a lot of bonuses that sound really fancy but are kind of hard to deal with. I'd really prefer a soundtrack or drama CD over most things, actually..."

Before they went any further off topic, the doorbell rang.

"I think someone's here, bro."

"Yeah." Itsuki got up and opened the door. Miyako was waiting there.

"Oh hey, Miyako."

"Mm. Hi, Itsuki." She looked at the shoes by the door. "Oh, Nayu and Fuwa are here? That's perfect."

"How so?"

"Well, there's something I kinda wanted the help of an author for."

After she went inside, she explained things to the rest of the group.

"...An original story for children?" Nayuta asked, cocking her head.

"Yeah. I have a friend in college who works part time at a day care center, and there's going to be a community story-time event there soon. They can use the books on hand, of course, but she thought about giving the kids an original story to listen to."

"Hmm... So you want to call upon some professionals for this?"

"Right." Miyako nodded.

Itsuki gave this a skeptical look. "Hmmmmmm... How much?"

"Huh?"

"How much will I get paid?"

"You want money for it?!"

Itsuki gave the surprised Miyako an exasperated sigh. "Of course I do. If you're asking a professional writer to make a story, you need to pay him appropriately."

"Cheapskate!"

The straight, unadorned criticism made Itsuki blush, despite himself.

"I am not! Whether you're my friend or not, I deserve to be paid fairly for my labor. Whether it's asking a professional cook to make a box lunch for you, or a manga artist to draw something for a local newsletter, or a singer to join in on karaoke, or a carpenter to whip up

a doghouse for you, or a comedian to say something funny at your next party, or a voice actor to do this or that character for you, they *all* deserve payment for that! Thinking you can get around that just because you're a *friend* is an affront to all the world's skilled laborers! I tell you, Japan needs to start thinking about paying people fairly for their talents—"

"All right, all right! I'll just tell her no, then. It's not a must-have anyway."

"I'm fine with it. Especially if it's Myaa asking."

Itsuki's eyes bugged out. "Wha... Kanikou?!"

"R-really?" Miyako smiled at Nayuta. "Thanks, Nayuta!"

"Hee-hee! Leave it to me, Myaa!"

"I can join in, too."

"You too, Haruto?!" a shocked Itsuki gasped.

"...Like, I don't think it's great to ask a pro to work for free just because you know him, but this is something for little kids, right? We're light novel writers, not children's book authors."

"Hmm..." Itsuki scowled at this logic.

"Well, thank you very much, Fuwa. So here are the details..."

Itsuki stepped in before they could get too deep into this without him. "W-wait!"

"What?"

"I... I didn't say I *wouldn't* help," he said, awkward and a little ashamed.

"You don't *have* to," Miyako replied, a little meanly. "I can't pay you anyway."

"Look, working outside my usual genre is good experience for me, all right?! It'll help me polish my skills. I don't need any money for it."

"Itsuki," Chihiro said, "you just don't want to be left out, do you?"

"It—it's not that!" a visibly reddened Itsuki said.

Miyako smirked. "All right. So you'll join us, Itsuki?"

"Sure... And while this isn't in my genre, this is gonna come from a creator working on the front lines of his field. I'm gonna create a story that'll capture the attention of little kids all over the world!"

And Itsuki was already back to his usual arrogant self.

2

So Itsuki and his two author acquaintances agreed to help Miyako with the tale.

"There will be about twenty first- and second-graders at this reading," Miyako explained, "about equal between boys and girls."

Itsuki pressed his lips together and thought. "Hmm... A story

targeting younger grade-schoolers..."

"Yeah," Haruto chimed in, "we usually write for such a different audience, I'm not sure where to begin..."

"Really?" Chihiro asked.

"Definitely." Haruto nodded. "With our work, the main target is middle-school boys. You can get an even younger audience if your work gets turned into anime, but no younger than age ten, I suppose."

"I think that's where my audience is, too," echoed Itsuki.

"What about you, Nayuta? I think you're popular across a broader age range, right?"

Nayuta turned a quizzical eye to Miyako. "Hmm, I don't really know, but I don't receive too many fan letters from elementary school kids. If I do, it's mainly from fifth or sixth graders."

"You neither, huh?"

"Yeah," Itsuki said, "Kanikou's books have tons of characters and psychological exposition. The love and relationship issues probably go over a lot of kids' heads."

"You think so?" a doubtful Miyako asked. "Because if you're little girl, I don't think it's weird at all if you've got a crush on someone."

"True," said Chihiro, nodding with confidence.

"R-really?"

"Wow... Girls sure are precocious..."

Chihiro gave Itsuki and Haruto a concerned look. "Well, I mean, that's how *I* picture it anyway."

"Around me, at least, I remember kids talking about who they liked all the time."

Itsuki and Haruto looked at Miyako, mouths agape.

"...So while us boys were talking about lifting up skirts and taking poops and how big our dicks were, you girls were going on about love and romance...?"

"You women are scary... You're on a completely different level of biology..."

"I..." Miyako paused, blushing under their fascinated gazes. "I mean, that doesn't apply to everyone! I didn't have *my* first love for a while, so..."

"Yeaaaa," Nayuta drawled, "when I was six, I think I still wanted to marry my dad."

This visibly relieved Itsuki and Haruto.

"Kanikou...!"

"I'm kind of glad to hear that. And actually, back when she was in elementary school, I think my little sister said she wanted to marry me or something crazy like that. I guess it depends on the individual."

"What's so crazy about marrying your big

brother?!”

“Geez.” Haruto winced. “Don’t get so pissed off about it, Itsuki. But we’re getting off topic. Either way, I don’t think we can write something in our style for little kids, so let’s think about something they would enjoy more.”

“Yeah. So maybe let’s look back on what we read when we were six,” Nayuta suggested.

The group retraced their memories.

“Age six, huh...? What did I read...?” Haruto put a hand to his chin. “I think I picked up Harry Potter in fifth grade, so... Really, I was probably watching anime and playing games more than reading books.”

“I don’t recall reading too many books that young, either,” Miyako said. “We had a few picture books at home, but I had more fun playing and stuff.”

“I had a lot of fairy-tale books at home,” Nayuta added, “so probably that.”

“Yeah, and I think I read a lot of biographies targeted for children. Like, Thomas Edison and Hideyo Noguchi and so on.”

Itsuki’s response surprised Nayuta. “Oh? You didn’t read fairy tales about little sisters or something?”

“What? I mean, are there any?”

“Um... ‘Hansel and Gretel,’ maybe?”

Itsuki admired this unexpectedly serious reply. “Ooh! That is a guy and his little sister, isn’t it?”

“And Cinderella had two stepsisters, right?” Chihiro said. “Wicked ones, but...”

“You’re right...! Maybe there are lot more little sisters in those tales than I thought. Now I’m a lot more interested. I’ll try reading some more when I have a chance,” Itsuki said with excitement.

“Wow. Even in fairy tales, you can always find your favorite trope...” Nayuta groaned fondly.

“But Itsuki, you didn’t love sisters like that when you were *that* young, did you?” Chihiro said with an edge of disappointment.

“Yeah. Besides that, I read things like Jean-Henri Fabre’s books on insects and Seton’s *Wild Animals I Have Known*. From there I got into juvenile literature...and when I discovered the sister thing in middle school, I dove right into light novels.”

“So,” Miyako concluded, “if you had never run into light novels, you might’ve been a normal book lover instead of this sister-obsessed nutcase.”

“Sounds like it...”

“Miyako! Chihiro! Stop looking so disappointed in me!”

“I love Itsuki just as he is, but I wonder what Itsuki as a young

literary student would look like? I bet he'd have glasses, all cool and intellectual."

"Ooh, I'd like to see that," Miyako said, joining in. "Maybe wearing a kimono with a stand-up collar shirt inside."

"Wait, what era are we in now?" moaned Itsuki.

"You're a genius, Myaa! Itsuki, the turn-of-the-century intellectual version! If *that* version pinned me against the wall, I'd be so wet!"

Nayuta immediately started playing out the scene in her mind—Itsuki with his scholar's cap, looming over a kimono-wearing Nayuta. The impact of his arm against the wall shook the fabric from her shoulders, leaving it loose enough to slide down and reveal her ample, heavy bosom...

"Ah! Oh my! What are you doing to me, kind student?!" she cried with a mixture of fear and excitement.

"Be not afraid," Itsuki whispered sweetly in her ear. "Man was born for love...and revolution."

"*Tou-kyuuun!*" (← The sound of her heart palpitating)

"The moon is beautiful tonight, isn't it?"

"I want to be yours forever!"

"To be or not to be, that is the question."

"Ohhh, I just want to gnaw on your dick..."

With a passionate kiss, the two of them melted into the sensual night...

"Weh-heh-heh... Hamlet, but sexier..."

"What is she hallucinating about...?"

Itsuki looked concerned about Nayuta. She was drooling now, spouting off nonsensical strings of words. But it wasn't worth thinking about, so he ignored her and turned to Chihiro.

"By the way, what were *you* reading around age six?"

"Uh, me? Um... We didn't have books at home, and I didn't receive an allowance, so..."

"Oh..."

Itsuki felt a bit awkward for asking, but Chihiro gave him a happy smile.

"I was so happy to go to school and get my own textbook. I practically memorized that thing, I read it so many times. Not just the language arts book, but the other subjects, too. So much stuff I didn't know... It was lots of fun!"

"Oh...?"

"....." "....."

Miyako and Haruto fell silent.

"That's...heavy," Nayuta whispered.

Itsuki, a kind expression on his face, took some bills from his wallet and held them out to Chihiro.

“Look... Here’s one hundred thousand yen. Use this to buy as much manga or novels or textbooks or picture books or porno mags as you want.”

“That—that’s fine!” Chihiro hurriedly replied. “I have an allowance *and* a part-time job now! I haven’t even read all the books in your room yet!”



“Oh... Well, you don't have to turn it down.”

“You're so nice to Chihiro,” observed Miyako. “Are you sure you're not into little brothers instead of sisters?”

Itsuki flushed red. “D-don't be stupid! If he was my sister, I'd give her my entire bank account!”

“Ah-ha-ha...” Chihiro laughed, looking a tad distressed.

“Still,” Haruto said, “it's funny how all of us were exposed to totally different things as kids.”

Itsuki nodded. “Yeah. It's fascinating to think about how the different backbones we grew up with connect to our different writing styles.”

“So what about writing this story? Maybe we could mix together the things we liked as kids?”

Nayuta found Itsuki shaking his head at her.

“No, you can't make anything coherent just mixing a bunch of stuff together, I don't think. We should probably each come up with our own story, then pick the one we like the best. How about that?”

“A competition, huh?” Haruto replied. “Yeah, if all three of us make one story, it could wind up like that one game of Once Upon a Time. Man, that sucked. It'll be easier to work alone anyway.”

“Me against Itsuki and Prince Manwhore, huh...? You know I'm always up for a competition.”

“You're on, Kanikou. So we'll all work under the same conditions? No handicaps?”

“I better step up, too,” reflected Haruto. “How long do we have, Miyako?”

“Uh... Until this time next week, but...”

“Not much,” he said, resolute. “Not enough to spend on too much research anyway.”

“All right,” said Itsuki. “Let's all come back here in a week with our stories.”

“Got it!”

“Roger.”

“...By the way, did your friend have any particular content requests?” Haruto asked.

“Well, anything...as long as it can keep a kid's attention, I suppose. But she said not to use any complex vocabulary. And she wanted to have some kind of moral at the end they could learn from.”

“All right...”

“Something they could learn from...?” Itsuki thought about this. “That's certainly nothing we usually have to think about.”

“No. This'll be a good exercise for us.”

“Okay,” Miyako said. “See you guys in a week!”

“I’m looking forward to this now,” commented Chihiro.

3

That night, Haruto came back home to find his sister standing imposingly at the front door.

“You’re so late, big bro!”

“Huh? What, you needed something from me?” Haruto snapped back at her.

“N-no...! But I always tell you to let me know if you’ll be late, don’t I?!”

“...I forgot.”

This did little to improve his sister’s mood.

“Why do you keep forgetting these things when I tell you over and over again? What are you, stupid? Are you sure your skull isn’t empty?!”

“I’m not spending my limited mental energy on crap that doesn’t matter!”

“Are you telling me what I say to you doesn’t matter?!”

“Yep.” He nodded.

“Nnnngh...” she growled. “You’re so *stupid*! I hope you hit your head on one of your porn-game boxes and die!”

Haruto snorted at this affront. “Ha! Don’t be dumb. Porn games *these* days don’t use those ridiculously huge boxes anymore. They’re in plastic cases like everything else. Hitting my head on one won’t hurt at all!”

“I don’t care! You’re so weird, you pervy creep!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Haruto said, having had about enough of this. “...If that’s all you needed, I’m going to my room. I got some urgent work to do.”

“Oh really? Well, go do it!”

Haruto’s sister turned around and stomped away. He sighed as he watched her go.

...Ugh. Why couldn’t I get a cute little sister? She didn’t used to be like this in the past...

Then it occurred to him.

In the past...?

“Come to think of it... Wait, hang on!”

He called out to his sister. She turned around.

“What do you want, stupid?”

“Hey, remember back in middle school, when I—?”

A week later, the storybook competition kicked off at Itsuki's place with the same group as before.

"Okay," Miyako began. "Are we ready to get started, guys?"

"Uh-huh." "Yep." "Ready!"

"Who wants to go first?"

"I'll go," Itsuki said, printout in his hand.

"I know we're competing," Nayuta replied, "but I'm sure looking forward to your latest work."

Itsuki grinned back at her. "Hee-hee-hee! I've got a good feeling about this one. It'll grab the hearts of kids and never let go! Just you watch!"

"Whooo!"

The other four gave Itsuki a round of applause. Clearing his throat, he began to read through his papers.

"...Um, once upon a time, a brother lived happily with his little sister."

"Called it," Miyako interjected.

"Well, yeah," he replied with a smile. "...One day, on the way to school, they saw a turtle-type P*kémon surrounded by several yokai monsters on the beach. 'Oh man,' the brother said. 'Big brother,' said the sister, 'call the police! I'll go *watch* the yokai for you.' So the brother ran off."

He was using a falsetto for the sister's voice and everything.

"Once the brother was gone, the sister approached the yokai. 'Stop beating up on those weaker than you,' she shouted. 'No way! Ha-ha!' 'What? Ha-ha!' 'Who do you think you are? Ha-ha!' The yokai all just laughed at her and didn't stop for a second. 'Well, so be it,' she said. 'I'm gonna teach all you mean yokai a lesson! Transform!' Taking a magic wand from her backpack, she shouted to the skies. Suddenly, her body was surrounded by light, as she turned into a pretty girl in a frilly, cute costume! Yes, she was Pr*Cure, a warrior of justice protecting the world from evil!"

"P-Pr*Cure?!" Haruto groaned.

"Heh-heh-heh! Well, if PreCur* is the protagonist, that'll grab the girls in the audience!" Itsuki explained in as authoritative a voice as he could muster.

Nayuta was in awe. "Ooh, so *that's* your strategy...! Even the most jaded little kid would have to smile at that!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Right? Let us continue!"

"I dunno about this...", Miyako whispered. Itsuki wasn't paying attention.

"Pr*Cure Punch! Pre*ure Kick! PreCu*e Uppercut!' Bash! Bam!

Boom! 'PreCure* Elbow! *reCure Flying Knee Kick! P*eCure Dynamite Bomber!' Thud! Whack! Slam! 'Aiee! We're done for!' With a wave of attacks, Pr*Cure whipped the yokai in no time flat. What a strong fighter! Now it was time to kill them all!"

"You don't really know the Pr*Cure series, do you, Itsuki?" Haruto asked, rolling his eyes. He had watched that show with his sister back in the day, keeping up with every season even as she grew out of it. To a dedicated fan like him, it was hard to accept Itsuki's crude depiction.

"Huh? No," Itsuki replied, not knowing any of this. "But they're kids, right? They won't care if it's not exactly like the real thing."

"You don't think?" Chihiro asked.

"Do you think we can get away with that copyright-wise?" Miyako gingerly ventured.

"Of course! It's not like we're publishing it! You've seen how the walls of elementary schools are draped with kids' drawings of A*pa*ma* and M*ck*y M*use and On* P*ece and D*****n. If *my* story's problematic, then so's every grade school in this country!"

"M-maybe...but are you sure this will work? What about, um, your pride as an author?"

"Pfft! Right now, I am not a sane, stable, sister-minded novelist but an evil children's entertainment creator willing to do anything to win! I'll use any property I can—not as an homage, but as is—and I won't pay a cent in royalties to JASRAC or anyone else! Whatever it takes to be popular!"

"An evil children's entertainment creator...?" Chihiro murmured.

"I'm not sure I'd want children to read your work," Miyako said, eyeing him carefully. "...But fine. Go on."

"Sure... Once the yokai had been scared off, the little sister went up to the bullied turtle-type Po*émon. 'Are you okay, little Poké*on?' 'Thank you, Pre*Cure. But what a pity! It's the end for you now! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!' Suddenly, with an evil laugh, the turtle Pokém*n diverted the sister's attention long enough to grow to an enormous size. In another moment, it turned into...a gigantic monster! The turtle-type P*kémon was actually Go*zilla! 'Graaaahhhhh!!'"

"You don't know anything about God*illa or Pokém*n, do you?" Haruto asked.

"Huh? No... Um, so Godz*lla fired off a burst of five-hundred-trillion-degree breath at P*eCure. 'God-zeeeeee !' it screamed. Pr*Cure was in big trouble now! But just then... 'I'll save you, my sister!' With a shout, someone leaped in to protect the sister from danger. '*amen Rider Miracle Galaxy Barrier!' Ba-daaaang! The mystery man flung out a really cool barrier to protect the sister from the flame breath. 'Are you all right, Sister?' 'That voice... Is that you, Big Brother?!' But he

didn't look like her brother at all. That figure, in a cool new fighter suit, was the superhero defender of justice, Kam*n Rider! Yes, her brother's secret identity had been revealed!"

"God, you're shameless!" Haruto shouted. Itsuki laughed back at his face.

"Ha-ha-ha! It's a dream crossover between Pre*ure and K*men Rider! This'll get the boys *and* the girls into it!"

"Yeah, what kid *doesn't* like cartoons and action shows like that? I'm losing my mind with excitement! I feel like I could transform into Cure Ahegao Double Peace at any moment!"

"...You like this sort of thing, Nayu?" Miyako remarked, questioning Nayuta's sudden enthusiasm.

"Godz*llaaaaaaa!' The furious G*dzilla once again spewed flame at P*eCure and Kame* Rider, but the two of them dodged it and went on the counterattack! 'K*men Rider Beam! Ka*en Rider Sonic Boom! Kam*n Rider Psycho Crusher!' Bweeee! Fwoooosh! Gwaaahh!"

"And you don't know *that* series, either..."

"Oh, just let him have his fun," Miyako said, resigned.

Itsuki's flight of fancy continued awhile longer. It was weird, though. As slapdash as it was, it *did* feature foreshadowing and other classic literary devices, and despite all the ups and downs, it had a single coherent plot to it. Along those lines, at least, it showed he was an author worthy of anime adaptation. It also included a number of phrases like "Kiss kiss fall in love" and "I wanna be the very best, like no one ever was," which, as long as you didn't care about copyrights too much, could certainly catch the attention of the audience.

He even had an ending song.

"Let me go... Let me goooo... I can't resist anymore... Let me go, let me gooo..."

No, his execution was flawless. (D*sn*y is actually terrifying, though, so the lyrics have been changed slightly for publication.)

Once he was finished singing, Chihiro, Nayuta, Miyako, and Haruto rewarded him with a smattering of applause. A bead of sweat rolled down Itsuki's forehead, his breathing hurried. He had done it.

"Hmph. How was *that*?"

"Um, yeah... That was certainly a surprise, but it was actually kind of fun. I don't know what else to say..."

"Yeah. I had no idea P*eCure and K*men Rider had that kind of secret..."

"That was a pretty complete story. There's no way in hell we could ever publish it, but..."

Miyako, Chihiro, and Haruto sounded conflicted, despite their compliments. Nayuta, on the other hand, was honestly moved.

"Amazing, Itsuki! I could learn a lot from you. You never let

copyright law faze you!"

"You better *not* learn from that," Haruto quickly replied.

Nayuta then took out her own script. "I'll go next. Itsuki went for an extravaganza of entertainment, but I devoted a lot more attention to the educational elements."

"Oh? That's a surprise."

"Nayu educating us...?" Miyako glared at her. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Okay, guys, listen up! This is called 'Kid Sperm's Big Adventure.'"

"I *knew* it!"

"This story," Nayuta continued, ignoring Miyako, "begins on a night seven years ago. A man and a woman were together in bed, naked and rubbing their bodies against each other. Okay, pop quiz! Which one of you kids knows what they were doing?"

"A quiz?! Ahh, you'll help the kids think for themselves and keep focused! I wish I thought about that..."

Itsuki had high praise for this approach, at least. No one else did.

"Are quizzes really compatible with story time?" Haruto asked.

"...What was that?" Nayuta replied, ignoring him, too. "'Pro wrestling?' No, that's not it. 'Sumo?' Mmm, no, it's not that. Huh? 'Gachimuchi Pants Wrestling?' Why do you know about that, huh? No, that's wrong, too."

"...This one-woman show is kind of irritating me," Itsuki said.

"Okay, the correct answer is... *Sex!* ♪"

With that high-pitched squeak at the end, Nayuta suddenly shifted voices into an educational video narrator tone.

"...Of course, the term 'sex' can take on a very broad meaning, but what this pair is doing involves the man inserting his genitals into the genitals of the woman in a standard sexual maneuver. This is known as 'copulation,' as performed in order to create children. When performed by animals, it is called 'mating.' When the man's sexual arousal reaches its peak, nerves in the spinal cord react and instruct the penis to eject white seminal fluid from its tip. This is known as ejaculation, and with it comes a feeling of euphoria. By the way, the white fluid ejected from the penis at this time contains several hundred million sperm, small, tadpole-like things about sixty micrometers in length. And out of these millions of sperm, ejected from the guy's pee-pee into the woman...was Kid Sperm, the hero of this story."

With that introduction, Nayuta dove into the adventure of Kid Sperm, a plucky little guy who overcame the challenges in his (its?) way to reach the egg at the end of the road—a vast, spectacular roller coaster ride. This competition against millions of enemies was studded with examples of tender friendship, as well as painful separations—

but Kid Sperm, undaunted, always pressed forward, his power symbolizing and celebrating the miracle of life.

This powerfully told story of majestic life, imparted through Nayuta's superior storytelling skills, fully sucked in the audience. Before long, they were all Kid Sperm, tagging along for the quest.

"...And so this is exactly how each and every one of you was born—buoyed by the thoughts and dreams of several hundred million of your tiny friends. Your existence—the very fact you are here today—is a true miracle. The end."

When Nayuta concluded, the room was silent for a moment.

"*sniff...*"

The only sound came from Miyako crying.

"What did you think of my story?" Nayuta asked a bit bashfully, since no one was saying.

"Nayuuuu," Miyako blubbered, "that was so good! I'm a wreck! Those sperm, all those sperm—so deep, and warm, and...ohh, the sperm, the *sperm*...!"

"Ee-hee-hee! Thank you, Myaa."

"...I... I hate to say it," Itsuki said, "but I have to admit—that was good."

"Really good," echoed Chihiro.

"Even when she's writing for children," Haruto added, "that Nayuta Kani quality is still there..."

"Nya-ha-ha! I went with more of a direct message here since it's for children, so I'm kind of embarrassed about it."

"...Hearing something like this, I feel pathetic for relying on name-brand characters and stuff. Dammit."

"Well, bro, your characters and dialogue were all ripped off, but I did like it. Good development."

"Yeah," echoed Haruto, "Nayuta's story was pretty much a straight line to the goal, but with yours, there was never any guessing *what* would come next. If we had the kids vote on which they liked better, I bet it'd be pretty close."

"Hmm... You think so?" Itsuki seemed a bit comforted, at least.

"Okay, Fuwa, you're last."

"Me?" Haruto scowled a bit. "It's kind of hard to follow *these* guys..."

"What, lost your confidence?"

"Well...kind of. But I'll read it off, I guess. Um, once, in a town in Chiba Prefecture, there was a brother who lived with her sister, who was seven years younger than him," he admitted to Itsuki.

"Whoa, you too?!" Itsuki reflexively shouted.

"Why Chiba?" Miyako wondered.

"Don't worry about it. So one day, when the two of them were

playing video games together, the TV screen suddenly lit up, and then —”

Haruto’s story chronicled the two siblings as they got sucked into the world of games and worked together to venture through it. There was no transforming into P*eCure or Kam*n Rider like in Itsuki’s tale; in terms of personality or ability, they were both pretty middle-of-the-road. There were monsters, witches, and other things in their way, but no consistent foreshadowing throughout, making it seem a bit more cobbled together. For the work of a professional author, it felt kind of half-baked.

But:

“...And so the two of them became king and queen, and together they lived happily ever after. The end.”

“Huh.” “Hohh...” “Hahh...”

Itsuki, Miyako, and Nayuta expressed their admiration.

“That was kind of nice,” Chihiro said. “I liked it.”

Miyako nodded. “Yeah... I don’t know how to put it, but I liked it, too.”

“Y-you did...? Ha-ha. That feels kinda funny to hear...”

Compared to Itsuki and Nayuta’s tales, Haruto’s was clearly less of a complete package. But they could feel something pure in it. Something you couldn’t plan out or use your writing skills to make happen. It was the desire to entertain the audience.

“...Mmm... The plot events were ridiculous, and the characters were inconsistent...”

Haruto chuckled forlornly at the dissatisfied Itsuki. “Ha-ha... Yeah, I expected as much.”

“But... I don’t know. It just drew me in somehow. Did you really write this, Haruto? It’s way different from your usual style...”

It was a far cry from his workmanlike writing. This was written based less on skill and more on instinct and sense.

“Oh, I definitely wrote it,” he told Itsuki. “Or, to be exact, a *younger* me wrote it. I just edited it a bit.”

“A younger you?” Miyako asked.

“Yeah. This was actually a story I wrote in middle school for my sister, who was in first grade back then. Reading back, it’s embarrassingly childish, but she really loved it at the time, so I thought it’d maybe strike a chord with our first-graders here.”

Itsuki nodded, convinced. “I see...”

“But I doubt this is gonna work, huh...?” Haruto gave a tight smile.

“.....”

Itsuki stared at him thoughtfully.

“I think your sister liked it because it’s the kind of thing a grade-

schooler would like, isn't it?" observed Chihiro.

"Yeah... She'd get so excited about the dumbest stories back then."

"That's not what I meant," Chihiro said, frowning. Haruto greeted this with a quizzical look but didn't pry any further.

"Okay, so, um, which should we submit to the storybook session? Probably not mine, but..."

"Hmm... Between Itsuki's and Nayu's, I'd have to go with Nayu's..."

"I agree, Miyako," said Chihiro. "Oh, um, assuming we had to pick one, I mean."

"...Aw, you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings," said Itsuki. "I think Kanikou beat me this time, too."

Nayuta beamed at him. "I win this time, huh?"

But Miyako seemed somewhat concerned. "Hang on, though. I need to go check with my friend."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding and taking out her smartphone. The group watched her, unsure what would happen next.

"...Um, hello? Hey, it's me... Yeah, about the story for your reading session... Um... It's kind of sex education... I said, *sex education!* Would that be all right? ...Huh? Um, specifically it's about...uh...it stars a sperm... It *stars a sperm!* ...But really, it's so poignant, I promise! ...How detailed does it get? Um, pretty detailed, I guess...? But it'll make you cry! Really!Okay... Yeah... Right, true... Uh-huh... Uh-huh... All right. Sure. I'll call you later."

Miyako ended the call, then gave her friends a disappointed look. "Uh... I'm sorry, Nayu, but she wasn't too keen on that story for the event. She said there was too much disagreement among kids' families about when sex ed is appropriate to risk it."

"Ooooh, yeah," Haruto said.

"Oof. I didn't even consider that." Nayuta looked saddened but understanding.

"I guess there's no getting around it," reflected Miyako. "No matter how touching it is. I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it," she said with a smile. "I'm just glad all of you liked it so much."

"So we'll go with my brother's story for the event—"

"No," Itsuki said, cutting Chihiro off.

"Huh?"

"Hngh!" With a grunt, Itsuki grandiosely ripped his sheets in half.

"Hyah?!"

"Itsuki! Why are you ripping up your own story?!"

Itsuki sniffed at the audience. "Hmph... I can't unleash this on the

world.”

“What do you mean? It was good!”

“...Listening to your story, Haruto, and then hearing that you wrote it for your little sister... That made me realize something.”

“Oh?”

“In the tale I wrote... I wasn’t considering the reader at all. I simply thought using popular characters and catchphrases would hit it big with kids, and I just kind of sewed it all together. It’s a pile of crap! It treats its readers like garbage! I can’t believe I let my drive to win force me into reading this junk in front of my peers!”

“Itsuki...” Concerned, Nayuta looked at her regretful boyfriend.

Itsuki instead turned to Haruto. “...Thanks, Haruto. Your love for your sister helped purify my soul. I’m free from the dark side now.”

“I don’t love my sister, dude!”

“You don’t? Because I kinda felt the love in your story, too.”

“You too, Miyako...?” Haruto blushed.

Itsuki wasn’t finished. “A story like mine, a bunch of trite elements with no love or passion to them... A middle-schooler beat it so easily, just because he was writing for his little sister! I have to learn from this. I’ve got to move forward in my pursuit of the ultimate little sister! I swear I will!” he declared with fire in his eyes.

“That’s the spirit,” cheered Nayuta.

“...I’m glad to hear that,” Miyako said, “I think. But what about the storybook event?”

“By the looks of things, it’s gonna have to be Fuwa’s,” Chihiro said as he eyed Haruto.

Haruto gave them a meek smile. “Uh... I’m sorry, but I gotta bow out, too. I really don’t think it’s the kinda story you can tell a large audience...”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

Chihiro gave him a soft smile back.

Miyako smiled, too, albeit with some disappointment. “All right. Well, I’ll have to break the news to my friend, then.”

“Sorry, Myaa.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“...Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Miyako said with a laugh. “I’m sorry you put up with our crazy request.”

So the competition for the storybook event ended with nobody’s work being picked. Miyako’s friend went with a book from their collection instead, a book that—much like the books of the pros who had competed—was meant for a wide audience, one the author didn’t personally know. In terms of quality, there was no comparing it with the tale Haruto revealed, written for a single person.

Still though, Chihiro couldn't help but envy Haruto's sister a bit.

5

"I'm home."

That night, Haruto was greeted by his cranky sister at the door again.

"You're late, bro!"

"Ugh, again?" Haruto scowled. "...I told you I was eating at Itsuki's tonight."

"Yeah, but... No!"

"Huh?"

"It's about that... You know. That thing you wrote long ago..."

"Oh, that? We wound up not using it."

"Oh..."

Haruto's sister looked a bit relieved to hear. Her brother sighed a bit.

"Just because you still had that story in your room by some miracle, I really couldn't just recycle my old work."

"Hmph! Well, of *course*! You'd *have* to be a grade-schooler to enjoy something that stupid!"

"A grade-schooler like you, to be exact."

"That...!"

The quick jab from Haruto made his sister blush.

"Because that story really *was* meant for you. There's no need to tell it to anyone else."

This made her blush harder.

"Wh-why are you giving me this sappy junk?! Of *course* there isn't! I can't believe you were dumb enough not to notice until now!"

"Yeah, yeah. It was shallow of me." Haruto brushed her off like usual.

"Well, if you regret it...you need to write me another story!"

"Huh?! Why?!"

"I—I mean, I don't want to read your stuff or anything, but it'd help me kill some time, at least!"

"Dumbass. I'm a professional writer, remember? Just because you know me doesn't mean you get my services for free. Pay up."

Itsuki's tirade earlier turned out to be pretty handy for Haruto. It certainly had the desired effect on his sister.

"...What's the deal with that? I don't just 'know' you. I'm your *sister*!"

That inconvenient truth made Haruto turn his eyes away.

".....Pfft. Well. If I find the time."

His sister smiled even as she yelled at him. “You better! Don’t forget!”

Watching her stomp away as usual, he couldn’t help but grin to himself...then sigh.

“Geez...”

Afterword

This series has hit Volume 7 at a remarkably fast clip. In it, we finally get to see Itsuki and Nayuta have a little hanky-panky, as well as Haruto changing and evolving. It also talks about a certain figure that's been mentioned here and there since way back in Volume 1—and of course this story element comes up right when I'm looking at my own anime adaptation.

Yes, *A Sister's All You Need* is becoming an anime, set to start broadcasting in the fall of 2017. I'm a full part of the staff, blessed with a great director and a group of incredible talents, and I think it'll turn out pretty well. I *think*. Stay on the lookout for more news and the big premiere. It's still a bit early for this, but if you could stash a little money away for the disc releases, I'd appreciate it.

The drama CD included with the special edition of this volume was written by me, just like the one from Volume 4. Everyone in the cast worked really hard on their performances—especially Mr. Kobayashi, who played Itsuki. I hope you'll enjoy many replays in your earbuds. Thanks to my fervent lobbying, we also got Kaori Mizuhashi to play Haruto's sister. Haruto may not have it easy, but getting a bossy sister with Mizuhashi's voice means he's totally won in the game of life. I hate him.

■ Q&A Corner

[Q] Do part-timers at publishers really get offered full-time jobs?

[A] Yes. Including a former editor of mine.

[Q] Do you run up against the Real Deadlines very often?

[A] A few times, in the past...but I'm now an honor student. But I still hope Iwasaki gets 'em ripped off.

[Q] Where do you picture this story taking place?

[A] Itsuki's apartment and Gift Publishing are modeled after the spot in Tokyo's Shibuya ward that a certain publisher used to work from—but it's more of an inspiration than an actual setting, so some things differ.

[Q] Do a lot of authors handle two running series at once, like Itsuki?

[A] There's actually quite a lot. I can hardly believe it.

[Q] Is it me or is there less little sister-oriented content lately?

[A] There never was much.

Around the time this volume launches, you'll also see Volume 3 of the *Sister's All You Need* comic, as well as *A Sister's All I'll Be!*, a spin-off comic starring Nayuta. Both are oozing the kind of charm only manga can provide, so I hope you'll enjoy them alongside the novels.

See you again in Volume 8.

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Early April 2017

Afterword

Thank you for reading up to the end. This is Kantoku, the illustrator.

Ui is such an angel. Her appearance blends exquisitely with her personality. And she's supposed to be the new girl in the gang, too! I'm curious to see what happens to the other new authors as well. They've all got a lot of unique traits, so hopefully, they get more involved in matters.

The dive into the past in the second half of this volume finally sets up the backdrop for this series's title. It leaves a strong impression, in a unique way—it's hard to describe how I felt, but I'm sure you all felt the same thing. Sure is a big leap from the madcap action on the drama CD! And speaking of madcap, someone revealed the anime announcement before we could. Tee-hee!

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KANTOKU

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